YUU MIYAZAKI

ILLUSTRATION BY okiura

# THE ASTERISK WAR

02. AWAKENING OF SILVER BEAUTY

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okiura

# THE ASTERISK WAR

02. AWAKENING OF SILVER BEAUTY

Kirin Toudou
KIRIN
TOUDOU
"I SEE...
YOU'RE SO KIND,
MR. AMAGIRI..."

"YOU KNOW—
I JUST *HAD*
TO GET A
LOOK AT YOU
WITH MY OWN
TWO EYES.
THE SWORD-
FIGHTING BOY
WHO CUT UP
ALL MY CUTE
DOLLIES."
ERNESTA
KÜHNE
Ernesta Kühne
"HONESTLY...
DON'T SCARE
ME LIKE THAT,
ERNESTA."
CAMILLA
PARETO
Camilla Pareto

"WELCOME, AYATO. PLEASE COME IN."
AYATO OBEYED, AND WHATEVER LUXURY HE MIGHT HAVE EXPECTED DID NOT PREPARE HIM FOR WHAT HE SAW. A SMALL TROPICAL PARADISE SPREAD OUT BEFORE HIM.

"Here I come!"
Kirin said curtly,
and in the next moment, her blade was rushing at his chest.
Half a gasp left him.

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# THE ASTERISK WAR

02. AWAKENING OF SILVER BEAUTY

**YUU MIYAZAKI**
**ILLUSTRATION: OKIURA**

YEN ON
NEW YORK

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THE ASTERISK WAR, Vol. 2
YUU MIYAZAKI

Translation by Melissa Tanaka
Cover art by okiura

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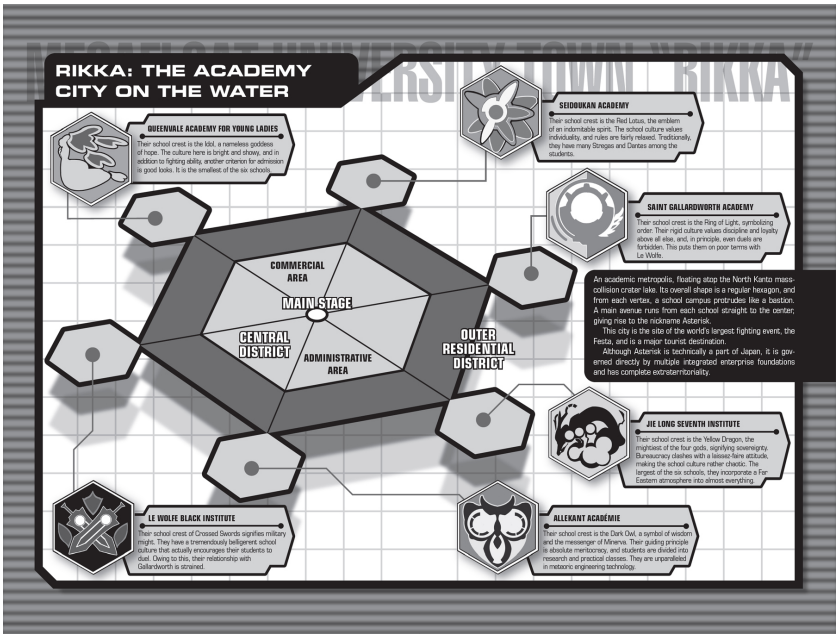

RIKKA: THE ACADEMY CITY ON THE WATER
QUEENVALE ACADEMY FOR YOUNG LADIES
Their school crest is the Idol, a nameless goddess of hope. The culture here is bright and showy, and in addition to fighting ability, another criterion for admission is good looks. It is the smallest of the six schools.
SEIDOUKAN ACADEMY
Their school crest is the Red Lotus, the emblem of an indomitable spirit. The school culture values individuality, and rules are fairly relaxed. Traditionally, they have many Stregas and Dantas among the students.
SAINT GALLARDWORTH ACADEMY
Their school crest is the Ring of Light, symbolizing order. Their rigid culture values discipline and loyalty above all else, and, in principle, even duels are forbidden. This puts them on poor terms with Le Wolfe.
COMMERCIAL AREA
MAIN STAGE
CENTRAL DISTRICT
ADMINISTRATIVE AREA
OUTER RESIDENTIAL DISTRICT
An academic metropolis, floating atop the North Kanto mass-collision crater lake. Its overall shape is a regular hexagon, and from each vertex, a school campus protrudes like a bastion. A main avenue runs from each school straight to the center, giving rise to the nickname Asterisk.
This city is the site of the world's largest fighting event, the Festa, and is a major tourist destination.
Although Asterisk is technically a part of Japan, it is governed directly by multiple integrated enterprise foundations and has complete extraterritoriality.
JIE LONG SEVENTH INSTITUTE
Their school crest is the Yellow Dragon, the mightiest of the four gods, signifying sovereignty. Bureaucracy clashes with a laissez-faire attitude, making the school culture rather chaotic. The largest of the six schools, they incorporate a Far Eastern atmosphere into almost everything.
LE WOLFE BLACK INSTITUTE
Their school crest of Crossed Swords signifies military might. They have a tremendously belligerent school culture that actually encourages their students to duel. Owing to this, their relationship with Gallardworth is strained.
ALLEKANT ACADÉMIE
Their school crest is the Dark Owl, a symbol of wisdom and the messenger of Minerva. Their guiding principle is absolute meritocracy, and students are divided into research and practical classes. They are unparalleled in meteoric engineering technology.

# CHAPTER 1
# THE RIKKA GARDEN SUMMIT

In the central district of Asterisk, at the junction of the commercial and administrative areas, rose the super skyscraper of Hotel Elnath.

This luxury hotel, frequented by VIPs and celebrities from around the world, was renowned most of all for the dome-shaped hanging gardens on its top floor. Only a few ever set foot in this garden, where streams rilled and flowers of all seasons were always in full bloom. Even the people of a class able to stay at this hotel—including integrated enterprise foundation executives—could not enter without permission.

This space was a sanctuary created specifically for a highly select group of individuals to meet once a month. Only six people in the world had the power to open its doors: the student council presidents of the six schools of Asterisk.

"Good day, everyone," an elegant voice said. "You all seem well."

In the center of the garden, atop a small hill that was just high enough to grant a view of the surroundings, stood a European-style gazebo. It was furnished inside with a hexagonal table that resembled a scaled-down version of Asterisk itself. Four of the six seats were occupied.

After a polite bow, Claudia took her place in the fifth seat, wearing her usual gentle smile.

"So good of you to join us, Miss Enfield. You are most punctual, as always." The princely young man sitting to Claudia's left welcomed her with a cordial grin. He was a beautiful youth: He sported well-defined features and sleek, light blond hair; a serene

manner; and refinement in his every move. Even the impeccable whites of the Saint Gallardworth Academy uniform suited him as if it were custom-made with him in mind.

At first glance, the soft smile he wore seemed genteel, but it was akin to the one on Claudia's face: It was impossible to tell what thoughts might lie behind it.

"Well, then. Now that we're all here, shall we begin? None of us has much time to spare, after all." The golden-haired young man opened an air-window, and thereby the meeting began.

This regular assembly of the six student council presidents was known informally as the Rikka Garden Summit, named after the place where it was held.

Ostensibly, the purpose of these meetings was to maintain amicable relations between the six schools and to exchange opinions for the prosperity of each school and the smooth operation of the Festa. In reality, however, it was the stage of a political power game in which each player tried to discern what the others were scheming.

The meeting was moderated by the representative of the school that had earned the highest overall rank in the previous Festa season.

"Oh, but…" Claudia turned her eyes to the still-vacant seat to her right, meant for the student council president of Queenvale Academy for Young Ladies.

"I think she's in the middle of her European tour. As usual, she has sent me the papers transferring her authority as moderator."

"Of course. Being a world-famous songstress must keep her very busy."

"Hah. What difference does it make if that baby girl's here or not?" scoffed the young man who sat directly across from the blond one.

He had dull, rusty hair and a short, stocky build, and his unusually large eyes gleamed with hostility. He leaned back in his chair haughtily, arms crossed and face twisted into a nasty sneer. This was his usual demeanor—at least, so far as Claudia knew. She had never once seen him smile.

Le Wolfe's school uniform had an intimidating effect in and of itself, but the sinister air of this young man only enhanced it.

"My dear representative of the Crossed Swords, I'd appreciate it if you could refrain from insulting the delegates of the other

schools." With a slightly vexed smile, the young blond man chastised the redheaded one.

"Insulting? I'm just stating the facts, everybody knows it. Those sluts at Queenvale couldn't run a school to save their lives. How many council meetings has that shorty missed since they voted her president? She doesn't do shit."

The Gallardworth president sighed. "What a fine vocabulary you have. You've made your point, so if you'd please stop there?"

But Le Wolfe's president continued, still leaning back in his seat. "Well, she was picked to represent those morons based on her looks, so I guess we shouldn't expect much from her besides—"

He broke off when a blade of pure white touched his throat.

"I believe I asked you to stop." The blond held the sword with one hand without dropping his soft smile.

Claudia couldn't stop herself from gaping in surprise.

In one fluid motion, the Gallardworth representative had drawn his Lux from its holster, activated it, and swung it out—smooth enough to inspire a new appreciation of beauty.

And frighteningly fast, no less.

"Ooh, now we're having fun. Wanna try me, Sir Paladin? Go right ahead, that'll be it for Gallardworth." Le Wolfe's president went on, provoking him without the slightest change in expression.

Indeed, any bloodshed at the Rikka Garden Summit would result in severe repercussions not only for the young man, but also for his school.

"You're not wrong." With a warm expression, the Gallardworth president pushed the point of his sword into the other youth's throat without hesitation.

The faintly glowing white blade pierced him through—but things were not as they seemed.

"Peh. Tricks like that are for babies," the Le Wolfe president said, bored even with the blade buried in his neck.

Not a single drop of blood flowed from where the sword entered his flesh.

"Why, you two never get enough of each other. What a lark to see you play like this at every meeting without tiring of it." This remark came from the young lady perched on the seat to the left of the Gallardworth president.

Or rather, it would be more accurate to describe her as a little girl. She had an innocent smile on her adorable face, her black hair

done up in loops like the wings of a butterfly. But there was a mature tranquility in the way she carried herself. On her chest gleamed the Yellow Dragon, the school crest of Jie Long Seventh Institute.

"But that's enough sport for now, lads," she said brightly. "Or else I shall have a thought to join in myself."

The blond youth sighed again and withdrew his sword—the Orga Lux Lei-Glems, pride of Saint Gallardworth Academy—and the Le Wolfe president clicked his tongue and kept quiet.

"When Her Imperial Highness intervenes, we can only obey." Claudia giggled with her hand to her mouth as the Gallardworth president theatrically shrugged his shoulders.

Meanwhile, the Le Wolfe president glowered and propped his feet up on the table.

"By the way, Claudia, I got ahold of a real interesting rumor." The glare he fixed on her had all the indiscriminate aggression of a mad dog. "Seidoukan and Allekant agreed to cooperate in developing a new kind of Lux, I heard. Care to explain?"

"Oh?"

"Mm, is that so?"

The Gallardworth and Jie Long presidents both turned to Claudia, interest plain on their faces.

"Impressive, but I suppose I shouldn't be surprised," she said. "News reaches you quick."

"Yeah, so? It's true?"

"Would you have brought it up at the summit if you weren't already certain?" Claudia's eyes narrowed with mirth as she again brought her hand to her mouth.

The red-haired president of Le Wolfe was the shrewdest among those who sat at the table.

If they were to meet in combat, the representatives from Gallardworth and Jie Long would be far more formidable. But in a setting like this, the stocky boy was without a doubt the most bothersome.

He was, after all, the first non-Genestella student to ever attain the rank of student council president at Le Wolfe Black Institute.

His conniving intellect was his weapon. He lacked strength or charisma, trustworthiness or popularity, or any other attribute that would make him suited to leadership. What he had was a singularly devilish talent for using and manipulating people.

He also had a deep-seated loathing for everything in existence, perhaps even himself. He was the very embodiment of hatred.

"However, that is strictly a matter between Seidoukan and Allekant," Claudia said. "I don't believe it concerns the rest of you."

"Not so fast, you sneaky vixen. Secret deals between schools are against the Stella Carta. What, you think the other schools are gonna just sit and watch while you get the drop on us?" He glanced around the table.

"Well, it does seem a little strange." The Gallardworth president nodded curtly without breaking his thin smile. "I can't really say without knowing the details, but I should think that Allekant has very little to gain from such a deal."

When it came to Lux technology, Allekant was not just a head above the rest, but two or three. It hardly made sense for them to seek out the help of another school.

"First of all," began the dragon-like girl of Jie Long academy, "Allekant is the only school with its own proper Lux development research facility, is it not? All the other schools, my own among them, simply use whatever is provided to us by the IEFs."

"Yes, and under our agreement, our specialists will go to Allekant to participate in joint research," added Claudia.

Everyone else at the table raised their eyebrows.

"Hey, how is that joint research? That's just a one-sided handover."

"There might be a better way to say this, but it sounds like an invitation to steal *their* technology."

"Truly, Allekant's generosity knows no bounds."

Claudia's smile never wavered.

"Yeah, I'd love to hear what the other concerned party has to say about it," the Le Wolfe president sneered. "You guys at Allekant are *okay* with this?"

All eyes turned to the student seated directly across from Claudia.

He had been silent this whole time, sitting there with his shoulders hunched in anxiety. Now he shook his head, confused. "Um, I wasn't told anything about it—that is, uh, I only signed off on it, and…I don't have any details…"

With his medium build and height, small eyes and black hair, nothing about him made much of an impression. His tented eyebrows gave him a timid look. All in all, he was an easily

overlooked figure. But on his chest he sported the Dark Owl, Allekant's school crest, the symbol of wisdom.

"You weren't told…?" the Le Wolfe boy said. "You're serious?"

"Uh, yeah…" At a loss, he scratched his head.

"Even for Allekant, they make a mockery of your position as student council president," the Jie Long president exclaimed. "And you accept this?"

The six schools each had their own particular campus culture, but Allekant had several unusual aspects to its internal organization. The students were divided into the research class, who specialized in R&D and development, and the practical class, who applied the fruits of that labor in combat. Hierarchically, the former group had superior standing.

The research class itself was divided into factions based on specialty, and these groups were in constant heated competition with one another. The power struggle was heavily influenced by the performance of the practical-class students, who fought in the Festa with the products developed by the factions they espoused.

The leader of the strongest faction therefore held all the power at Allekant. The function of the student council president was little more than regulatory, coordinating the competition between the factions—in other words, a figurehead.

"Well, um…," Allekant's figurehead dithered.

Unable to bear his discomfort, Claudia gently spoke up for him. "I'm afraid you've all misunderstood something. This is not a secret pact or anything of the sort. Rather, it is an official partnership between Seidoukan Academy and Allekant Académie. We will publicly announce the details in due time."

The Allekant president sighed in visible relief.

"So you're sticking to your story that this is a fair deal?"

"It is. In exchange for the use of Allekant's facilities, we will be responsible for seventy percent of the research and development costs."

"Speaking of Seidoukan, I caught wind of a row among some of your students—and no small affair at that," the little Jie Long president interjected nonchalantly. "They say you went so far as to mobilize Shadowstar. This wouldn't have anything to do with your arrangement with Allekant, now would it?"

"I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about," Claudia replied, perfectly placid.

Of course, these two events had everything to do with each other.

Simply put, the joint research agreement was compensation for the Silas Norman incident. Employing a student of another school to attack his classmates was a blatant violation of the Stella Carta. If it were made public, Allekant would certainly have faced punishment and suffered a blow to their reputation as well.

But simply outing Allekant had no benefit for Seidoukan. So Claudia had proposed that Allekant share their technological expertise in exchange for Seidoukan's silence.

"Blackhearted and a bald-faced liar." With that, the Le Wolfe president turned away from Claudia, declaring the end of his interest in the subject.

Le Wolfe's intelligence organization was notorious, well-connected with the darker corners of Asterisk, and the best of any of the six schools. In the matter of Silas, it was reasonable to assume that they had a good grasp of what had transpired. After all, the conclusion to the affair took place in the redevelopment area, practically their backyard.

Did Le Wolfe's student council president drop the subject so readily because he wanted to save it for later negotiations or because he had other schemes in mind…?

He was not someone to be taken lightly. But Claudia had no desire to poke that hornet's nest here.

"That concludes that discussion, then?" She brought the conversation to an end with a bright smile.

"Hmm. I suppose we might just as well revisit it after seeing the announcement. So, today's agenda—" The Gallardworth president attempted to bring the meeting back to order, but there was another interruption.

"Um, excuse me. May I say something?"

"Oh, it's you this time. What is it?"

The one who had sheepishly raised his hand was the nondescript boy from Allekant.

"So, er, the thing is… This is a little sudden, but there is something that I'd like to add to the agenda, if we could…"

"Well, then. What is it?" the dragon girl snapped.

The Allekant representative, appearing to shrink slightly as the others turned their gaze on him, looked around the table for a few moments before he haltingly began. "Uh— I would like to propose

that we discuss…the usage of artificial intelligence in Asterisk, including the matter of rights."

"Artificial intelligence?" The Le Wolfe president scowled suspiciously.

"Yes. That's right. With the recent advances in meteoric engineering, there has been tremendous progress in the field. It won't be long before we see AI that possesses something close to human sentience—that much is beyond doubt. However, it's unlikely that any country will be able to address the subject with legislation in a timely manner. We need only to look to the history of our own kind, the Genestella, for an example. And that's why I propose that, since we are relatively unfettered, we take in the AI as a sort of model for the rest of the world…"

"Are you talking about welcoming sentient machines as our fellow students at Asterisk? And granting them the same rights as humans?" the Gallardworth president asked in mild astonishment.

"Yes. And if possible, having them participate in the Festa…"

"Dumbass. That's insane." The Le Wolfe president coldly shot him down. "I don't give a shit if you eggheads want to put machines in school uniforms. But if you're saying they should fight in the Festa, that's a different story."

"I agree," Claudia said. "This proposal seems awfully far-fetched. There are so many problems that come readily to mind. The age requirements for the Festa, for instance. If we apply the thirteen-to-twenty-two requirement literally, wouldn't they be obsolete by the time they can participate?"

"And how will you determine if they possess sentience?" the Gallardworth asked. "I think you'll have to begin with establishing standards for that. Well, I imagine that some sort of regulations will become necessary in the future."

"So *all* of you lot are against the idea? How dreary." Puffing her cheeks out in a sulk, the little girl crossed her arms and looked around the table.

"What, Jie Long is in favor of this crap?"

"But of course. It will make things more interesting, I should think."

The dragon girl consistently acted solely on personal whims. Despite her duties as a representative, she prioritized her own will with hardly a second thought for the interests of the school. She even seemed to enjoy herself when things took a turn for the

chaotic.

The reason a person like her could remain student council president, it was said, was her overwhelming prowess in combat.

Each school had its own method for selecting members of the student council. Seidoukan, for instance, held elections; at Le Wolfe, the top-ranked student had the right to name the student council president. And at Jie Long, the selection process was a simple tournament. The strongest of the self-nominated candidates become student council president.

All this meant was that in Jie Long, the largest school of the six, there was not a single student who could stop her.

In any case, Seidoukan, Gallardworth, and Le Wolfe voted nay. Even with Jie Long, there were only two votes in favor, including Allekant, who had proposed the idea.

"The transferal of authority papers from Queenvale indicate that they vote with the majority," the Gallardworth president said. "So that makes four votes against. The proposal fails."

"I see… Too bad." The Allekant president's shoulders fell, although this outcome had been perfectly obvious.

Allekant, of course, stood to gain the most from his own proposal. It never could have passed without prior discussion. And at any rate, the Rikka Garden Summit did not have the final say in the decision.

Above the gathered student council presidents, there was an administrative committee whose members were selected from the respective integrated enterprise foundations backing the six schools. Even if a measure passed here, it would be taken up by the administrative committee, where the will of the Rikka Garden Council was given some weight but was not absolute. This proposal would definitely have been rejected there.

But the Allekant president wasn't done…

"Then it would be acceptable to you if such machines were used strictly as weapons only, whether or not they're sentient?" he mumbled, still hanging his head, and the atmosphere around the table tensed.

"What exactly do you mean?" Claudia asked.

"Well, think about it. They won't be granted rights as students, and they have to be treated as machines regardless of sentience. Isn't that what you all just said? Even if they do look human, machines are machines—just tools. And in the Stella Carta, there

are no terms restricting the usage of tools—that is, weapons."

"So you wanna use automated Puppets as weapons?"

"Hmm. Indeed, there is no clause in the Stella Carta to forbid this."

There had never been any reason to forbid it. A combat Puppet controlled by a person was one thing, but an automated one that could perform only simple tasks would be no match for a Genestella on the battle stage. You'd have a scrap heap in the blink of an eye.

But…what if a Puppet was programmed to have the same level of cognitive ability as a human being?

"I see. So this is what you really had in mind," Claudia said, laughter in her eyes.

That first proposal was bound to be rejected. It had been the Allekant president's plan all along to lead the conversation to this juncture.

This young man was no mere figurehead after all.

"Well… All right. I suppose we need to discuss this more seriously," the Le Wolfe president said, sighing for the third time this meeting.

The Allekant president courteously bowed his head. "Thank you very much. Now I'll be able to report back with some good news."

*

The July sun stung his skin, unrelenting even in the late afternoon.

Sweating lightly, Ayato ran through the courtyard, trying to thread himself along the shadows of the trees.

"Oh man," he panted. "I don't think I'm going to make it."

He could just see the brooding face of Julis, who was especially strict about punctuality.

There was a reason for his tardiness: their homeroom teacher, Kyouko, foisting class chores on him. He hoped that Julis would understand if he explained.

It had been two weeks since Ayato had agreed to become Julis's tag team partner and officially registered for the Phoenix. They were immersing themselves in training every possible day. After all, he had never fought in a tag match before, and he still knew almost nothing about the rules of the Festa. He had a mountain of things to learn.

Julis seemed to have no experience with a tag match, either, so the two of them were figuring things out as they went. But they did not have the luxury of time. Only one month remained until the start of the Phoenix.

"At the very least, we have to learn to fight together at close range, or she could end up roasting me along with our opponents…"

He left the courtyard, and just as he was about to run across the corridor connecting the middle school and college buildings, Ayato suddenly felt someone else's presence.

A girl emerged suddenly from behind a pillar. He slowed down in a panic, but it was too late.

The girl noticed him a moment after and looked at him in surprise. A collision seemed unavoidable.

Faced with no other option, Ayato tried rather forcefully to change direction. A maneuver beyond his capacity sent motes of light flying like sparks from metal, and a pain akin to an electric shock jolted through his body, but he still accomplished it.

His relief, however, was short-lived. Somehow, there in his new evasive trajectory was the girl's face.

"Huh?"

"Eek—!"

This time, there really was no avoiding it. Ayato and the girl spectacularly slammed into each other.

Fortunately for both, Ayato had managed to slow down considerably and the impact was not so severe. Still, he had just run into a girl with all his weight. He broke his fall and got up immediately to see to the girl now seated on the ground. "Hey, are you all right? You're not hurt?"

"Oh yes… I'm…fine," the girl replied in a tiny voice and looked up at Ayato with a bashful smile.

"I'm really sorry!" Ayato bowed deeply in apology and peered at her again. Seeing that she had no obvious injuries, he let out a sigh of relief with his hand to his chest.

In the same moment, he came to the grave realization that he was seeing too much and immediately averted his gaze.

The girl had one knee raised and her skirt had flown up completely. The clear sight of her underwear and its cute pattern burned into his eyes. His face spontaneously went red.

Noticing the problem with a gasp, the girl hurried to fix her

skirt and hugged herself tightly, trying to curl into a ball. Her tearful, timid demeanor was reminiscent of a small animal. She seemed unaware that this had the effect of accentuating her generously sized breasts.

Again, Ayato had no idea where to look.

She was wearing a middle school uniform, so Ayato deduced that she was younger than him. Her large, round eyes and small, pointed nose made a charming combination. While her entire body emanated a shy quality, she was quite a beautiful girl.

She wore her silver hair tied up in two pigtails at the sides while the rest spilled down her back. Unusual hair colors—he thought of Saya—were not uncommon among Genestella. He guessed that the girl was one.

The shapeliness of her body was obvious through her uniform, and she wore a scabbard at her waist that appeared to house a real blade.

"Um…anyway, I'm sorry. I was in a hurry, but I should have been more careful."

Ayato extended his hand to her, his gaze still averted. The girl stared at his hand indecisively for a few moments, then hesitantly took it.

Now on her feet, the girl brushed dirt from her uniform as if to hide her embarrassment and bowed curtly. "N-no, I'm sorry, too. I can't seem to shake my habit of walking without making a sound. Even though my uncle always scolds me for it…"

Hearing that, Ayato drew a breath in sudden realization.

True, he was in a hurry, and he could have been more careful. But this was the first time he had failed to notice someone until they had come so close to him.

But it was more than that. They had collided precisely because they had both moved in the same direction in an attempt to dodge the other. But if she could move like that…

"Um, is something wrong?" The girl tilted her head inquisitively when Ayato suddenly grew quiet.

"Oh, um, it's nothing… Wait a second. There's something in your hair."

A little dry stick, about the size of a pinkie finger, was tangled in her lovely silver locks.

"I do…? Wh-where?" Bewildered, she grabbed at her hair, but she couldn't see the stick. She kept feeling for it in all the wrong spots.

The flustered girl was strangely adorable, and part of him

wanted to watch her a little while longer—but he couldn't.

"Here, hold still." Smiling awkwardly, Ayato reached out and gently removed the piece of branch, careful not to pull her hair.

"Th-thank you." Her face was so red that he thought it might begin steaming at any moment. She lowered her head, unable to say anything more.

Then she peeked up at Ayato and immediately looked back down at the ground as soon as their eyes met.

"Um, so…" As he stood there wondering what was next, a voice boomed from the direction of the middle school building.

"Kirin! What are you doing over there?!"

"Oh! I'm sorry, Uncle! I'll be right there!" The girl tensed, then gave Ayato a rushed bow. "S-see you later…!"

"Uh, okay." Ayato glanced over to see a man on the far side of middle age standing at the entrance of the middle school. The girl ran toward him.

While the man had a sturdy build, he did not seem to be Genestella, as Ayato could not sense any prana from him. The girl had called him "Uncle," but it was not easy for unaffiliated people, even family members, to gain access to the campus. So he might have some connection to the school.

Ayato was absentmindedly pondering this—until he remembered what he was doing here and checked the time.

As he'd feared, it was now well past when he'd promised to meet *her*.

He felt a cold sweat run down his back. Just as he began to break into a dash, he received a call on the mobile device in his pocket.

With an ominous premonition—or rather, a near certainty—he opened an air-window to see the irritated face of who else but Julis-Alexia von Riessfeld glaring at him.

# CHAPTER 2
# THE OWL'S SECRET SCHEMES

"Burst into bloom—*Livingston Daisy!*"

As her imperious voice rang through the training room, swaths of flame burst into the air around Julis.

They swirled like tornadoes and coalesced into disks—more than ten of them. The projectiles were chakrams of searing heat, their fiery blades spinning.

"Go!"

Shedding sparks, the disks rushed at Ayato, who awaited the attack with his sword ready.

Almost too swiftly to see, the giant, single-edged sword with jet-black markings on its blade sliced the first wave of chakrams in half, and they dissipated like blown-out candle flames.

In the meantime, however, more had moved around to fly at him from the left and right. He had to marvel at their perfect coordination as he took a backward leap to dodge the whirling blades.

As if they had anticipated this maneuver, still more death disks fell upon him from above with tremendous speed. And there were three more rushing at him from the front, with another trio close behind. A layered attack with varied timing.

It was an outstanding feat just to control over a dozen objects moving in three dimensions. That Julis could manipulate them with such precision was a testament to her skill, not to mention an exceptional spatial awareness.

Ayato twisted to dodge the attacks from above, then turned and channeled his momentum to swing at the chakrams flying at him

from the front. But instead of cutting through the projectiles, he struck with the side of his blade, sweeping them away.

They knocked into each other in midair, altering their trajectories. The chakrams grazed past him, slicing his training gear with a slight burning smell—but nothing more.

"Whew…" Ayato exhaled and readjusted his stance with his greatsword, the Ser Veresta.

"Unbelievable. You always pull off the most ridiculous stunts like it's nothing at all." Julis glared at him with mild exasperation. "Now, I'm *highly* interested in how you'll avoid the next round."

And as she spoke, a dozen more chakrams of fire swirled around her.

"I'm not sure I have any tricks left that will impress you, Julis."

"No? Then what *will* you do?" She carefully spread out the chakrams on all three axes to prepare for her next attack. While she was actually arranging an intricate battle formation, there was a beauty to it that called to mind a flower garden.

"Well… How about something like this?" As soon as the words left his mouth, Ayato broke into a full sprint toward the young woman. Keeping his body low, he rushed fiercely into the garden of fire.

"What—?!" Caught off guard, her reaction was momentarily delayed. She hastily moved the formation, but it was obvious that she couldn't catch up to his speed.

Ayato danced his way through the flames and was quickly closing his distance when he noticed it—the gleeful smile on her face.

"You fell for it! Blossom, *Gloriosa!*"

Suddenly, magic circles appeared at Ayato's feet, and pillars of flame burst out to block his path. Five pillars surrounded him, as if he was captured in the clawed hand of an enormous monster. *A fixed ability?!*

Stregas and Dantes often had certain powers that could be activated only when specific conditions were met. Such abilities, it was said, were often used as traps. Case in point: this.

"Heh. Finally, I win."

He heard her triumphant voice from beyond the flames, but couldn't see her face. The pillars turned inward toward Ayato, pointed like talons, and closed in to crush him in their grip.

Even then, Ayato calmly ordered his breathing in an instant.

“Amagiri Shinmei Style Middle Technique—*Ten-Thorned Thistle!*”

Changing his grip to hold the greatsword in his right hand, he twisted dramatically and made a rotating sweep. Then, after he had swung through with his right, he transferred the sword to his left and spun again with a backhand slash.

Two sets of streaks ran through the pillars surrounding him, and in the next instant, all five had been extinguished.

Paying no heed to the residual flames sizzling against his skin, Ayato swiftly closed the distance.

As Julis stood stunned, he thrust his sword at her chest—and in that same instant, a shrill alarm sounded in the training room.

*

“I thought I’d win today for sure,” Julis grumbled, arms crossed, cheeks puffed out in displeasure.

Sitting on the cool floor, Ayato looked up at her sheepishly.

This was Julis’s exclusive training room. The two of them had it to themselves. With a high ceiling, it was nearly as spacious as a gymnasium. Of course, not just anyone was granted a facility like this. It was one of the perks of being a Page One.

“I have to admit, losing so many times is putting some dents in my confidence.”

“But Julis, you are really strong.”

“Don’t try to flatter me. I couldn’t land a single blow on you today. As usual.” Still sulking, she turned her angry glare on Ayato.

“I’m not flattering you. Really, you almost had me.”

He had been perfectly lured to the exact spot of the trap—an inexcusable blunder. With any other weapon than the Ser Veresta, he really could have been in trouble.

And Julis was a remarkably fast learner. When they had started training together, she could hardly keep up with Ayato’s movements. Now she was deftly using her powers to constrain his maneuvers. She was no match for Ayato once he managed to get into close range. At this rate, however, it was clear that would become only more difficult.

“Anyway, you have a lot of moves, too. The one you used at the end—I hadn’t seen that before.”

“Y-yes, well, that is something I take some pride in…” Julis nodded, her expression softening slightly.

The breadth of her repertoire was extraordinary. Ayato had seen at least ten different techniques, ranging from attack to defense to support. This was yet more evidence of the mastery she had over her abilities.

“But winning the Festa would be downright impossible without that level of skill,” she went on. “Ayato, who do you think has the better record at the Festa? Those with special powers, like Stregas and Dantes—or everyone else?”

“Huh? Well, it must be people with special powers.”

There were virtually no downsides for Stregas and Dantes. While it was true that they had to allocate prana to use their abilities, they still had an overwhelming advantage over those without.

But Julis slowly shook her head.

“It is true that their winning percentages are high—at least, early on in their careers,” she said with a conflicted look. “But as they continue to fight, most of them begin to lose more and more. Their powers are revealed, the specifics become widely known, and then the competition makes adjustments. There are a few fighters who don’t fit into that mold, but overall, those with special abilities win about fifty percent of the time.”

“Adjustments?”

“The students here aren’t stupid. If they knew they were fighting me, they would at least prepare to fight against fire. Just as Silas did.”

Ayato remembered the boy they’d fought the other day. He had prepared fire-resistant dolls in fighting Julis.

“I see. So Stregas and Dantes become predictable with their powers.”

“Yes. The narrower the ability, the more powerful they are—but that comes with the cost of versatility. It would be easy enough to win against an opponent who’s never seen you before, but this tournament isn’t about winning once. You have to keep winning. Those who are able to maintain a high ranking are the ones who understand that.”

Julis made it sound simple, but even Ayato could tell that a winning streak was easier said than done in Asterisk.

“Luckily for me, I have an ability whose usage I can find ways

to diversify. I have to make the most of it. That's all there is to it."

"But Stregas and Dantes aren't the only ones at a disadvantage when the competition knows their skills, right?"

"Well, that's true. But the trend is more marked for those with special abilities… Oh, by the way, how are you feeling? Physically, I mean. Any issues?" Julis suddenly peered into Ayato's face.

It was a casual gesture, but his cheeks grew hot as her shapely face came unexpectedly close to his own.

Julis flinched when she noticed his embarrassment and quickly drew back. Like Ayato, her cheeks went red, and she found herself averting her gaze.

"Um…I guess I'm okay. I can move around just fine." Ayato shifted away a little before standing and brushed at his pants as if he could shake off the awkwardness between them along with the dust.

"Oh. G-good. That's good." She nodded deliberately and cleared her throat. "So…the three-minute mark is a definite constraint."

"Seems that way. Is that too short?"

"To be honest, it doesn't make things very easy," she replied, looking grim.

Their earlier skirmish was more than mere training. They were testing how long Ayato could fight at full strength and the aftereffects on his body.

Ayato's full power had been sealed away by his sister, but he could release it of his own volition for a short time—a few minutes at most. And then there would be aftereffects, pain so intense he couldn't move.

Three minutes, they found, was the mark under which the aftereffects could be kept to a minimum.

"I think I could fight normally like this," he said.

"You say that, but *look* at you… Well, I suppose it's better than having you collapse on me."

With his power sealed, Ayato's skills in combat were slightly below average among the fighters in Asterisk. While it was possible for him to fight at full strength for over five minutes, if he did so, the aftereffects would leave him practically paralyzed in agony for a full day. That was too high a risk for the Festa.

Julis faced downward, lost in thought for several moments, and then slowly looked up at her friend. "Just to clarify—you can't release your powers again from your current state?"

“Not happening. I need at least a few hours to rest.”

Even though he had some strength left now, the very act of breaking the seal took a tremendous amount of physical effort.

“Maybe it would be possible just for a moment…,” he mused.

Releasing his strength for only an instant, as he had done weeks before in his duel with Julis, took less of a toll on his body. It was akin to sliding out his hand between the bars of a cell rather than breaking free entirely.

But even that much, he couldn’t do repeatedly.

“We could use that for an emergency evasive maneuver or maybe a surprise attack,” Julis said. “Which is better than nothing.”

“I think you’re right.”

He recalled that he had very recently done that as an emergency maneuver.

Thinking of that silver-haired girl he almost crashed into in the covered walkway and her resemblance to a small animal, he couldn’t help but smile.

“At any rate, it’s no use fixating on the impossible,” Julis declared. “Let’s just accept that you can fight at full strength for three minutes and plan around that.”

“Yeah, I agree. That’s more realistic.”

“In three minutes, we should be able to handle most opponents. At least, we won’t have much trouble with students up to a level close to mine. I hate to admit it, but I know that from personal experience. But facing stronger opponents will be a problem.”

“Are there many students stronger than you, Julis?”

His question was entirely sincere. Her eyes widened. “Are you really serious—? Never mind. I think I’m finally beginning to understand you.”

“Huh…?”

“Ayato, I’m flattered that you think so highly of me, but here in Asterisk, there are a number of students stronger than me. Not a terribly big number—but a number. Even a conservative estimate would be more than I can count using all my fingers and toes.”

“That many?”

Julis was strong. The other day, she had struggled against Silas, but only after more or less falling into a trap. In Ayato’s estimation, by raw ability Silas was no match for his friend.

Of course, it could be argued that creating such an uneven situation, as Silas had, was one kind of strength.

“Just to name a well-known example, the president of Gallardworth’s student council is said to be a swordsman of the highest caliber. I’ve seen him fight, and he’s at least as good as you at full strength. I’ve also heard that Jie Long’s student council president has freakish abilities—although we probably don’t need to worry about her. She isn’t old enough yet to compete in the Festa.”

“Hmm. The student council presidents of Gallardworth and Jie Long, huh?” Ayato got the impression that the student council presidents were all quite formidable, Claudia included. Then he recalled something. “Oh yeah, there’s one really strong person I know about. She was in the news last year for a few days running. She has successive Lindvolus victories under her belt, and she’s with Le Wolfe… What was her name…?”

Ayato had little interest in the Festa, but the frenzy of media coverage surrounding that fighter had been impossible to miss even for him. The girl was the second fighter to ever win the Lindvolus two seasons in a row, and she was considered a near lock to become the first fighter to achieve three successive victories.

“The Witch of Solitary Venom, Orphelia,” Julis murmured, her voice low and flat, as if to keep some emotion at bay.

“Oh yeah, that’s her!” Ayato clapped once and then noticed that something was off with Julis.

She was staring at the floor with a conflicted look—that of anger and sadness.

“Julis…?” he asked, and she suddenly looked up.

“Oh—sorry. I was just thinking,” she said, evading the unspoken question, then struck a confident pose with her index finger pointed up.

“A-anyway, there are also plenty of great fighters in Asterisk who aren’t students. The commander of the city guard, for instance, is a Strega renowned as the strongest in the city’s history, and our homeroom teacher, Ms. Yatsuzaki, is probably far stronger than I am.”

“Ms. Yatsuzaki?”

“You might not guess it, but she was the leader of the only team from Le Wolfe to win the Gryps. Why someone like that is teaching at Seidoukan, though, I have no idea.”

Ayato thought about his rough-spoken, mean-eyed teacher. Now that Julis mentioned it, she never showed a moment of vulnerability in her everyday movements, and she meted out

ruthless punishment to any students caught goofing off in class.

Only a Genestella, and a very strong one at that, could deal with students in Asterisk that way.

"However—there is one advantage you have over all of the fighters we just mentioned," Julis said. "Do you know what that is?"

"Huh…? Nope, not a clue."

"It's that *your* abilities are not well-known yet. The incident with Silas was never made public, and there were no witnesses."

It was then that Ayato understood. "So that takes us back to what we were talking about before, right?"

"Yes."

Going back to what Julis had said: that the competition didn't know what to expect from him yet.

"The Orga Lux leases at each school are public, so our opponents will prepare with that in mind… Although they can't really do much with that information." Julis looked over at the Ser Veresta, which was now in standby mode, and let out a small sigh. "If only you could wield it in your normal condition, too…"

Ayato laughed nervously. "Well, that's the one thing I can't fix."

The Ser Veresta permitted him to wield it only when his powers were unshackled. If he were to pick it up now, it would remain in standby mode, its power dormant.

"By the way, is it true that your sister used to wield that sword?"

"All anyone can tell me is 'probably,'" he admitted.

"Hmm. But if it is true, that's quite unusual."

"Yeah, I thought so, too. Siblings using the same Orga Lux…"

"No, that's not what I meant." Julis shook her head. "Your sister is a Strega, isn't she? Orga Luxes are rarely compatible with Stregas and other fighters with special abilities."

"Oh. Really?"

"Yes. When they channel mana to their abilities, it apparently produces an adverse reaction in the urm-manadite. There are probably less than ten fighters in the history of Asterisk who were born with special powers and also wielded Orga Luxes."

"So Orga Luxes tend to dislike people with special powers?"

Orga Lux weapons had a will of their own and chose their users. Ayato had experienced that firsthand—rather painfully.

"The reasons aren't well understood yet, but yes, it might be

something like that." Julis smiled and shrugged. "We're getting off topic. At any rate, we have one month until the Phoenix. So be careful not to tip your hand by getting caught up in duels or anything like that. Agreed?"

"Got it."

Julis nodded in satisfaction at his reply, then drew the rapier-shaped Lux from the holster at her waist and spun it in her hand. "Good. Let's resume our training. I want us able to beat all but the highest-ranked competitors with your powers sealed. And to do that, we have to improve our teamwork, or I'll end up burning you to a crisp along with our opponents."

"…That would not be ideal." Definitely not.

"We ought to have mock matches with another pair to spar against," Julis said. "But that's not exactly an option…"

"Huh? Why don't we just ask some of our classmates?"

Julis glared at him, scowling. "That's not very nice. You know I don't have any friends here."

"Oh, um, I didn't mean to—"

"Anyway, did you already forget what we just discussed? Classmates or not, if they help us train, then they'll find out about your power. Do you really have any—?"

Just when Julis seemed about to launch into a tirade, a ringing sound shot through the room. A moment later, an air-window opened in front of them.

"*You have visitors. Would you like them shown inside?*" the smooth artificial voice announced. Julis and Ayato looked at each other in surprise.

*

"Well. You two are the last combination of visitors I could've expected," Julis said to the two students at the entrance, with a somewhat musing look on her face.

One was a young man over six feet tall, in stark contrast to the other, a girl so short she could be mistaken for a fifth grader. Both visitors stared at Julis with sullen expressions.

"Saya and Lester?" Ayato blurted. "What are you two doing here?"

As if in response, the girl—Saya Sasamiya—stepped forward and pointed straight at Julis. "Not fair."

"Wha—?" Caught off guard by this sudden declaration, Julis blinked several times with her mouth open. "'Not fair'…? What's not fair?"

"You've been monopolizing Ayato lately, Riessfeld. This is a clear violation of antitrust law and other regulations pertaining to fair trade practices. I demand that this situation be rectified."

"I had no idea that associating with him was subject to antitrust laws," Julis said, mildly astonished, but Saya took another step forward without so much as raising an eyebrow.

"It's no use playing dumb. The evidence speaks for itself. I've already determined beyond a reasonable doubt that you and Ayato have been spending entire afternoons in a locked room together, engaged in activities that you dare not speak of in public."

"Could you make that sound any more indecent?! We're only training for the Phoenix! And where did you hear that drivel, anyway?"

"I must protect my sources… Let's just say that I heard it from the resourceful Mr. E.Y."

"Damn you, Yabuki!" It was too obvious.

"You cling too much to Ayato in the first place, Riessfeld. Just the other day, you acted like you just happened to sit together at lunch, when in fact nothing could be more suspicious."

"Wha—? No, that really was a coincidence…!"

"Coincidences don't occur five days in a row. Your story holds water like a sieve."

Julis made a stifled, angry sound. "Then I've got something to say to you, too, Sasamiya! You just use that 'we grew up together' line as an excuse…"

Saya and Julis went on in heated argument, close enough to literally butt heads.

"Ooo-kay…I better stay out of that." Ayato sighed. Then, with

an awkward smile, he faced the male visitor, Lester MacPhail. “Out of the hospital, Lester? That’s good to see.”

“Eh… It was really just a scratch,” Lester replied curtly, looking somewhat uncomfortable.

Ayato had heard that the events of the other day had landed Lester in the hospital, but apparently he was not hurt too seriously. That, or he was a remarkably quick healer.

“So, what brings you here?” Ayato asked. “And with Saya, no less.”

“I just came across this pip-squeak on my way here. She looked kinda lost, and we were headed to the same place anyway. Figured I might as well let her tag along.”

Somehow catching those words, Saya paused in her altercation with Julis to turn to Lester. “Who are you calling a pip-squeak? But anyway, thanks for bringing me with you.” She bobbed her head to him in gratitude, then promptly faced Julis again to resume their quarrel. She had a way of getting others to march to her drum.

This training room was located inside an all-purpose arena where the official ranking matches were held. It was connected by a single path from the school building, making it almost impossible for someone to lose their way from one to the other. No one but Saya could pull it off, Ayato thought.

“Um… But you were headed the same way?” he said. “You mean you wanted to see us, too, Lester?”

Lester frowned even more deeply and looked away. “Yeah, so… that thing with Silas, I thought, well, you know. Well, that ended up with you, uh, helping me, pretty much. So, I thought, I should set things straight, or um, say thanks… So I, uh…” Lester paused there and gave Ayato a tiny bow, still not quite looking at him. “Well, thanks! That’s all I wanted to say. I’ll get out of your way now!”

He was already turning to leave. Ayato stopped him. “Wha—! Hey, wait a second, Lester!”

He had apparently come only to thank Ayato, in his own clumsy way. On that point, Lester and Julis were not all that different.

Ayato couldn’t stand to miss this chance to reconcile with the boy who had previously shown so much animosity toward him. And the perfect idea came to him. “Oh yeah! We were just looking for sparring partners, to train with for the tag match. Lester, would you mind helping us out? You and Saya.”

“Practice partners?”

“Huh?”

Lester, Saya, and Julis all turned toward Ayato.

“H-hey, Ayato, you can’t just—!”

“But we do need practice partners, don’t we? And we can trust these two with my secret.”

Lester already had learned some details about Ayato’s condition, and Saya already knew about his true powers.

“Well, I suppose so, but…”

Ayato took that halting response from Julis as acquiescence. “What do you say, guys? You’d really be doing us a favor.”

Saya was quick to accept with a nod. “I don’t mind.”

Then, of course, all eyes turned to Lester. He stood there looking confused for a moment, then awkwardly scratched his cheek and mumbled, “Well, fine…if you really need me to.”

*

Ayato explained his situation as the newcomers warmed up.

“I see. So your big sister sealed away your powers…” Saya let out a sigh, looking perhaps more serious than usual. “You were pretty wild as a kid. I thought you’d settled down an awful lot. Now I understand why.”

“Um, I don’t think I was ever that much of a rascal…”

“But Haru isn’t the type to do something like that without a good reason. I’m sure she must have had one,” Saya said, giving him a solemn gaze.

Ayato was touched to see that she really believed that. “Yeah. Thanks, Saya.”

“Besides, you’re just as cool as ever. No worries there.”

“Well, thanks for that, too, I guess,” Ayato laughed sheepishly.

The feeling of Saya wrapping her arms around him was familiar and comforting. At the same time, it made him conscious of their height difference, which was new, and his heart quickened a little.

“*Ahem!*” Julis interrupted. “If you don’t mind, I’d like to get started…”

“Oh, right. Sorry.”

For some reason, Julis seemed to be on edge.

“I know you only just formed your tag team, so let’s keep this

simple," she said. "Luckily for us, both teams have members who are clearly suited to fighting in the front or in the back. So let's work on support. When the front fighters engage in close-range combat, the rear flanks should keep each other in check while providing support to their respective front ranks. Got it?"

"…Roger."

Julis and Saya met each other's gaze with a force that seemed to throw off sparks.

"Wow, you two are really focused," Ayato remarked in awe.

Sensing the tension, Lester already had his Bardiche-Leo activated. "Quit fussing over the girls. What about you? Are you ready?"

"Huh?"

"From what you told us just now, you can't go full strength again today, right?"

"That's about the size of it."

"Too bad, 'cause I'm not about to go easy on you." As Lester stood, grinning, Ayato heard something in his voice that sent a chill down his back.

"Don't be too hard on me, either," was all he could think to say in response as he activated his standard-issue Lux sword.

The instant the buzzer rang, signaling the start of the match, Lester rushed ferociously at Ayato. He should have expected it from those videos of Lester's matches, but facing it for himself was a whole new level of intimidating.

"Here I come!" Lester attacked with a sweep of his ax.

Ayato parried with his sword, only to be pushed back. That physical strength was astounding.

Meteor Arts might have been useful against Lester's brawn, but unfortunately for Ayato, he didn't have the skill.

"We're just getting started!"

As Ayato somehow got both feet on the floor again, Lester rushed in with a second attack before he could even regain his stance.

The blade of light swung down at him. Ayato dodged it by a hair's breadth and lunged at Lester. It was the textbook strategy against a long-reach weapon like the Bardiche-Leo. Lester was ready for it, and used the momentum from his attack to slam his shoulder into Ayato.

*"Oof!"* Overwhelmed by the sheer difference in physique, Ayato had no choice but to place some more distance between them—only to be attacked a third time.

"What's the matter? Is that all you got?!"

*At this rate, he'll just keep pounding me…* As that thought crossed Ayato's mind, a cluster of fireballs intervened.

"Almost had you!" Lester clicked his tongue in frustration.

It was one of Julis's techniques—the Primrose, if Ayato recalled correctly. The flames swarmed around Lester, dancing through the air like huge fireflies.

"*Whew…!* Thanks, Julis." He suddenly understood why Lester had such a hard time fighting her.

Her powers allowed her to attack her opponent regardless of distance. On top of that, a cumbersome weapon like the Bardiche-Leo made it difficult to respond to a rapid-fire flame barrage.

"Damn it! Can never pin *you* down… Hey, pip-squeak! Are you going to do your part or wh—"

Lester turned toward Saya in irritation, then simply froze.

Julis and Ayato, too, stood there gaping.

"…I'm about to." Saya readied her gun—or rather, her cannon. The barrel was easily over seven feet long.

A number of stat display air-windows opened around it, and the core emitted a brilliant light that indicated Meteor Arts.

"Type thirty-nine Lux laser cannon, Wolfdora—*Strafe*," Saya murmured nonchalantly, and with a rumble, a stream of light poured forth.

"Whoa—wait!" Lester shouted.

Ayato hit the floor. A massively wide beam of light swept through the space above his head. Lying prone, he saw Julis and Lester doing the same. They had managed to get down just in time.

The cylinder of light fanned over them, then slowly faded.

Ayato gingerly turned to see that the laser had blasted an enormous hole in the wall as easily as a caterpillar gnawing through a leaf. The buildings of Asterisk—and especially arenas like this one—were built with considerably fortified material, which still did nothing against the destructive power of Saya's arsenal.

Lester was the first one to come to his senses. He jumped up and strode toward Saya, a vein in his forehead angrily pulsing. "Th…that's overdoing it, you idiot! Are you trying to kill me, too?!"

"If you don't dodge it, that's your own fault. The old Ayato

wouldn't have had any problem." There wasn't a hint of shame in Saya's voice. Standing there innocently, she even seemed slightly puzzled at Lester's anger.

"Sasamiya. You're something else…" Julis couldn't even muster anger. She hid her face in her palm.

"My, my. You certainly did a number on the wall," a serene voice rang out from the very same hole in the wall. It was a voice they all knew.

*

The face peeking in from beyond the wall belonged to none other than Claudia, the student council president of Seidoukan Academy.

"Please keep in mind that while we allow Page One students like yourselves the use of this training room, it *is* still a school facility."

"…We know," Saya said. "This was just an unexpected accident that occurred in the course of our training. It's not as if we meant to destroy the wall."

"Of course. I see." With a kind smile, Claudia nodded magnanimously.

But then—

"Ooh, ohmygosh, wasn't that a fright, Camilla! Who'd have expected the wall to explode like that? I thought our school was the dictionary picture of *weird*, but other places can get interesting too, huh?!"

"Oh, whatever. Settle down, will you, Ernesta? Please try not to give me more trouble than you already have."

Through the hole in the wall, Ayato saw two women he didn't recognize step out from behind Claudia.

It was not only their faces that he didn't recognize. After all, he had transferred here less than a month ago, so there were many of those. The thing most unfamiliar to him about these two was their uniforms.

"What's the meaning of this, Claudia?" Julis asked, low and cold.

Ayato turned to see that like Julis, Lester was also on alert with a sharp glare. Claudia seemed not to notice their alarm and lightly clapped her hands.

“Oh, I’d better introduce you. May I present Miss Camilla Pareto and Miss Ernesta Kühne, from Allekant Académie.”

“From Allekant…?” Ayato asked.

That would explain the wariness from Lester and Julis. Allekant was the school that had allegedly pulled the strings in the incident with Silas. For those two—who were direct victims of his actions—it was no exaggeration to say that Allekant was an enemy.

Claudia and the two newcomers walked around to enter the room through the now-useless entrance.

“Our school and Allekant have entered into an agreement to cooperate on Lux development. Miss Pareto here is in charge of the project. We invited her to our campus today to make that agreement official.”

“…Hello.” The bronze-skinned woman gave them a token nod.

She seemed a little older than Ayato. She had a figure as enchanting as Claudia’s, with a finely toned build. Her deep-set eyes and small, serious mouth made a somehow chilly impression.

“Joint development…? *Hmph.* I see. So that’s what you did,” Julis spat scornfully.

Apparently she had some grasp of the situation that eluded Ayato. He opened his mouth to ask her.

But Lester beat him to it: “Hey, Julis. What d’you mean by that?”

“You’re as slow as ever. This is some sort of compensation for what happened with Silas. Seidoukan is probably getting Allekant to share technology in exchange for not accusing them publicly.”

“What…?!” That was all Lester could say.

“I haven’t the faintest idea what you’re talking about.” Claudia simply smiled gracefully, neither confirming nor denying, but that was enough of an answer.

“No matter,” Julis said curtly. “You’re in charge of dealing with that incident. I suppose this sort of subterfuge is your strong suit, anyway. But why are the Allekant specialists *here*?”

“Well, that’s because—”

“Hee! Because *I* said I wanted to come see!” the other girl in the Allekant uniform interjected, hopping up and down with her hand raised. The girl called Ernesta seemed much more expressive than Camilla. Unlike her companion, she wore what appeared to be a lab coat over her uniform. However, she also boasted an ample bust, the bouncing of which only served to emphasize her assertiveness.

She seemed about the same age as Ayato and his classmates. At least, he didn’t think she could be older than them.

“You know—I just *had* to get a look at you with my own two eyes. The sword-fighting boy who cut up all my cute dollies.” She grinned brightly.

“Huh?”

“Wha—?”

An indescribably strange silence enveloped them.

Julis and Lester let their jaws hang open, and Camilla held hers shut in speechless dismay. Even Claudia put her hand to her mouth in shock. Ayato was no exception.

This girl had all but declared herself the mastermind. It was impossible not to be surprised.

“So you’re the one I’ve heard so much about. Hmm, yes. Yes, I see!” Ernesta, completely ignoring the atmosphere of the room,

closed in on Ayato and peered at him intently, nodding several times to herself as if quite impressed. “Mm-hmm, not bad at all. I think I like you!”

Then, while Ayato stood stunned, she beckoned him closer still.

With one hand at her mouth, she was calling to him: *“Psst.”*

When he cautiously leaned down, Ernesta narrowed her eyes like a cat’s and whispered in his ear, “But I won’t make it so easy next time.”

*Next time…?!* he thought. Before he could raise his face away from hers, Ernesta’s lips lightly met his cheek.

“Huh?!”

“What?!”

“—ugh!”

“Oh my…”

Ayato jumped back, startled, while the eyes of the three girls from Seidoukan practically glowed with rage.

“Wh-why, you! What do you think you’re—?!”

“……This thieving cat must die.”

Julis drew her rapier, and Saya turned the barrel of her Lux cannon (which was still active) on Ernesta.

“Eee-hee-hee, so scary! No need to get all prickly, it’s just a little greeting!” Ernesta fled to hide behind Camilla, but then poked out her head and laughed mischievously. “Why don’t we let bygones be bygones and play nice? I’d really like to be friends. Not just with Mr. Sword Fighter here, but with the Witch of the Resplendent Flames, too.”

“Unfortunately, even aside from the business with Silas, I happen to despise Allekant. No thanks.”

The anger in Julis’s voice was something deep and fierce. Ayato could understand not caring to be friends, but seeing her so openly display her antipathy, he wondered if there was something else at work.

“Aww. You’re no fun!”

“Sorry, Ernesta is…well, you can see how she is. Allow me to apologize on her behalf.” Camilla bowed her head slightly with a strained smile.

She seemed to be possessed of a more sensible character—compared to Ernesta Kühne, at least.

Then Camilla’s gaze fell on the Lux that Saya held. “Hmm, now this is interesting. A very unique Lux. Two manadites in the core…

No, three? It looks like they were forcibly linked to increase output… There's something familiar about this design concept."

Saya looked surprised—a rarity for her—as she stared back at Camilla. "…That's right. How could you tell?"

"But of course. This is my specialty, after all. I have to say, though, that it's hardly very practical as a weapon."

Saya's eyebrow twitched.

"The LOBOS transition method, which involves the linking of multiple cores, is an imperfect technology that was abandoned over a decade ago. The output can't be stabilized, and it places a large burden on the user. Not only will the Lux itself be bulky, but to maintain the high output, one must induce mana excitation overload, which requires long pauses between attacks. It doesn't look like you've improved on those flaws."

Ayato couldn't understand half of what Camilla went on about, but she seemed to be pointing out just how difficult Saya's Lux was to handle. If every attack required mana excitation overload or Meteor Arts, it would be like fighting using only special moves.

"…All of that is true." Even as Saya bit her lip in frustration, she glared straight at Camilla. "But I won't let you speak badly of my dad's gun. I demand you retract your statements."

"Your father's…?" Camilla studied Saya's face. "Oh—would you happen to be Dr. Sasamiya's daughter?"

There were hints of both familiarity and derision in her voice as she said that name.

"What if I am?" Saya said.

"All the more reason for me not to retract my criticism." Camilla shrugged, and Saya's glare turned even more piercing. "Dr. Sasamiya was dismissed from Allekant and our Ferrovius faction for his renegade views. Lux technology is power, and power must be granted not to individuals, but to the masses. That is the fundamental ideology of Ferrovius, and as its representative, I must reject his heresy."

Saya and Camilla glared at each other, neither budging an inch. The air felt as heavy as a powder keg waiting for a spark.

Claudia rather theatrically cleared her throat, not a moment too soon. "My dear guests. Shall we attend to the matter that brings you here today?"

"Yes, let's. My apologies." With a heavy sigh, Camilla disengaged her gaze. She followed Claudia and turned her back on

Saya.

"Wait. I *will* hear you retract your statements." Saya kept glaring, but Camilla walked away without a reply.

"Camilla can be pretty stubborn once she gets like that! She's not real big on changing her mind, I gotta say." Ernesta, who had been taking in the scene with great interest, could barely restrain her delight. "Sooo…if you really insist, I guess you'll have to do it by force! I mean, we *do* have rules for that."

"…You mean, duel her?"

"Hee! No way, Camilla would never accept a *duel* challenge!" Ernesta waved her hand with a high laugh. "But, you know, the two of us are signed up to compete in the Phoenix."

"The Phoenix?"

"If you keep winning, we'll end up facing each other sometime." While Ernesta's eyes were full of mirth, she did not appear to be joking.

"Ernesta, time to go," Camilla said from the doorway.

"Yeah! I'm coming!" Ernesta called, then skipped her way out of the training room. "Well, see you around, guys!"

"What a joke," Julis muttered after a pause. "The both of them."

She was beyond anger, simply astounded. She fetched the drink she'd left by the wall.

"They said they were fighting in the Phoenix," Lester said. "But they've gotta be research class, right? They're out of their minds."

"Research class?" Ayato asked.

Lester looked astounded as he replied, "Students at Allekant are split up into research class, who work on developing Luxes and the like, and the practical class, who actually compete in the Festa. The researchers don't actually fight…usually."

"Huh…" Those two girls *did* appear to be Genestella, but they didn't carry themselves like trained fighters. So then why…?

"Ayato." As he was lost in thought, Saya tugged at the hem of his shirt.

"Hmm? What is it, Saya?"

"I'm going to fight in the Phoenix, too. I've decided."

"The Phoenix? Well, sure, that's fine, but it's a tag team tournament. Who are you going to team up with?"

"With you, of course."

At Saya's casual declaration, Julis began to choke violently on

her drink. “Excuse me?! He’s *my* partner!”

As Julis pulled hard on Ayato’s right arm, Saya wrapped herself around his left in response and tugged.

“…Monopoly is not allowed.”

“H-hold on, you two… Ow! Hey, that really hurts!”

He was being yanked to and fro like a toy in a children’s fight, but when the contenders were two Genestella, it was no laughing matter.

“Why don’t you team up with Lester? Like you did just now!” Ayato protested.

Saya’s response was immediate. “I don’t want to.”

“Me neither! No way am I tagging up with someone who’ll just blow me away along with the opponents!” Lester exclaimed. “Besides, I already have a tag team partner!”

“…Yes. That’s important. The only one who can dodge my attacks properly is Ayato.”

“That’s something for *you* to work on!” Julis scolded. “Besides, the deadline to register for the Phoenix is past! What do you plan to do about that?”

“Um… That is a problem.” Saya let go of Ayato and stood deep in thought.

Julis seized the opportunity to pull Ayato behind herself and took on a threatening stance.

“Well, it’s still possible to register as a stand-in,” Lester suggested. “There’re always some teams who get hurt.”

“Right. Then I’ll do that.” Saya snapped her fingers.

“And who will your partner be?” Julis asked cautiously.

“Ayato.”

“Denied!”

The two of them began arguing again.

Even as Ayato let out a long sigh, Ernesta’s words came back to him. *“But I won’t make it so easy next time.”*

She might have been only teasing, but it stuck in his mind. *Just what is “next time” supposed to mean…?*

*

“Honestly… Don’t scare me like that, Ernesta.”

Having signed the official agreement, Camilla admonished

Ernesta outside the Seidoukan school building.

"Hunh? Whatcha mean?" Ernesta looked back innocently, but Camilla had known her too long to be fooled.

"There was no need to go out of your way to tell them *you* were involved in that incident."

Camilla was referring to Ernesta's declaration in the training room. She had essentially outed herself as the mastermind, causing the Seidoukan students to go on the defensive. There was nothing to be gained from that.

"What's the big deal? This cooperation agreement puts the whole thing behind us. They can't dig it up and use it against us *now*."

"That's true, but…"

As Ernesta pointed out, the agreement was advantageous to Seidoukan, and it was hard to imagine them breaking it.

"Anyway, I appreciate the support from Ferrovius. For realsies. Things would never have gone this smoothly unless we dangled Lux technology in their faces."

"That's not a problem. It's technology with real barriers for practical implementation, anyway. Just remember that you guys at Pygmalion owe us one."

This was the plain truth. That particular technology was revolutionary, but it was hardly in keeping with the vision of Ferrovius—or of Camilla herself.

Rather, it belonged to the same category as Dr. Sasamiya's weapons.

"*Hee-hee!* Anyway, you sure were provoking that blue-haired girl, Camilla! What a rare sight."

"I wasn't provoking her—that was just how I felt. Anyway, the preparations are going well, I presume?"

"Yup, smooth as can be! We were able to get Sonnet and Methuselah to quit their opportunistic spectating and join our side. So Tenorio won't be able to make a move for a while."

Ernesta said this like it was nothing. But in fact, they had the summit under their complete control.

"You really are good at this game."

Camilla had never doubted her own talents. Even in Allekant, where so-called geniuses gathered from all over the globe, she considered herself equipped with the skills to lead an enormous faction.

Still, spending time with the girl in front of her now, she was occasionally reminded of the obvious difference in their natural gifts, both as researchers and as faction leaders.

"The student council president made out well at the Rikka Garden Summit, so I guess the table is set for us! Now to give my babies a final tune-up…" But now doubt clouded Ernesta's expression.

"Is there a problem?" Camilla asked.

"Sort of. Thanks to Silas, I've got plenty of data for the drive systems. But the output systems haven't really stabilized yet. We have some ideas, but I think that part will take a little more time."

"If he'd just come to Allekant, things would have been much easier."

"Well, no helping that. Dantes and Stregas don't go willingly to our school. I mean, hey, no one wants to be a guinea pig!"

Hearing Ernesta's cheerful tone, Camilla couldn't keep a sardonic smile from her lips. "So you trick and manipulate them instead?"

"Yup! I'll do anything. Anything it takes to make my dream come true."

Ernesta looked at the sky tinted red in the sunset. Playful mischief danced in her eyes as usual, but Camilla knew that behind them lay a serious and dangerous resolve.

"Is that why you said you wanted to meet them all of a sudden?"

Still gazing skyward, Ernesta nodded. "Yup. I think Mr. Sword Fighter is going to be our toughest opponent at the Phoenix. So I wanted to see him once before the tournament!"

"Ayato Amagiri, was it? True, the data we have on him is quite impressive…"

Camilla thought of the young man and how he still had something of childish innocence in his face. Despite what they knew, to her he only seemed like an easygoing and ordinary boy.

It was difficult to see him as much of a threat, even taking into consideration his Orga Lux, the Ser Veresta.

"I sure would like to have just a *little* more data on him. Mm-hmm, just a little…" Ernesta was talking and nodding to herself.

"You're not up to something, are you?"

"Um, I'm not sure yet. My dolls still need tuning up, and we don't have time to make arrangements with another school. The

best thing would be to get something to happen inside Seidoukan, but that's harder now that we don't have Silas anymore. And I'd need to set up all the devices to actually collect the data…" Ernesta went on muttering to herself, but then raised her head with a sudden realization. "Oh, that's it. I could do *that*."

"You thought of something?"

Ernesta nodded happily to Camilla's query. "Tenorio have been on our case lately, right? They're all like, 'You didn't do Allekant any favors with that Silas incident!'"

"They have some nerve, after what *they* pulled."

Compared to the Tenorio blunder from four years ago, Ernesta's recent faux pas seemed trivial.

In any case, the primary objective in her involvement with Silas had been to gather data on the mana transmission efficiency of a telekinetic. And on that score, she had been completely successful.

What was more, Ferrovius had agreed to pay the price for that experiment. Tenorio had no grounds on which to object.

"Well, maybe it's about time we gave them a chance to redeem themselves. That would be fair, right?" Ernesta grinned gleefully.

"I'm not following."

"See, if I've failed but they succeed in cleaning up after me, *they* will have produced superior results, right?"

Now Camilla was beginning to see what Ernesta had in mind. "So you're going to send Tenorio after them."

Ernesta let out a sly giggle. "Ooh, it'll be fun to try for two birds with one stone, don't you think?"

Seeing her immersed in a new scheme, Camilla couldn't help but smile.

She was extremely reckless and irresponsible, but a surprisingly steadfast friend.

And while Ernesta caused her a lot of grief, for Camilla that was a small price to pay.

# CHAPTER 3
# WITH LIGHTNING-EDGED SPEED

"So, can you find out anything about those two?"

"Oh-ho-ho, I see, I see. Allekant students in *our* school, huh?"

It was lunch recess, the next day, in the classroom of first-year homeroom three.

Ayato had asked Eishirou about the two girls from Allekant. Eishirou nodded in good cheer as he dexterously sliced an apple with a knife-shaped Lux.

Eishirou seemed strapped for cash these days. The apple appeared to be his entire lunch, and even that had been a gift from their dorm neighbor, whose family ran a farming complex.

"Getting the scoop on students from another school. Now, that might be a tad steep." Chomping on an apple slice, he rubbed the thumb and first two fingers of his free hand together.

"How much can you get me for buying you lunch today?"

"Sold! It's been ages since I've had a serious lunch!" Eishirou stuffed the rest of the apple into his mouth all at once and whipped out his mobile device. "I'll tell you on the way to the cafeteria. So, Camilla and Ernesta, right?" He led Ayato out of the classroom.

Since he had to keep the incident with Silas a secret, Ayato couldn't explain all the details. For Eishirou, however, just the names were plenty to go on. The faces displayed on his air-windows were none other than the two visitors from the day before.

"First, we have this exotic beauty… Her name is Camilla Pareto, and she's with Allekant's Research Institute. She represents Ferrovius, the largest faction in Allekant. She specializes in Lux development, and the winning team of last season's Phoenix used

Luxes developed by her group. Fighters using her weapons also won a lot of points in the other Festa tournaments. So she played a significant part in Allekant taking second place in the standings last season."

"Wow, I had no idea she was so important."

Now that he thought about it, her crisp, dignified demeanor, her sharp gaze—everything about her suggested great proficiency.

"And the other one is Ernesta Kühne. She's renowned as the greatest genius in Allekant and represents the Pygmalion faction… I don't have much information on her, though. All I've really heard is that she's quite the eccentric."

There was no mistaking that.

Ayato's face grew hot as he remembered the sensation of her lips on his cheek. Even leaving *that* aside, she seemed to be very high-energy in general.

"And she managed to raise Pygmalion from a third-rate faction to a leading one," Eishirou went on. "She's got skills, that's for sure."

"What are these Ferrovius and Pygmalion things?"

"Well, each school has internal power struggles, but Allekant takes it to extremes. They're split into different factions based on research topics, and the factions compete for research funds and good fighters in the practical class." Eishirou opened yet another air-window. It showed what looked to be a pie chart. "As I just mentioned, the largest faction is Ferrovius, which is involved in Lux development. As you can see, they have roughly half the resources in Allekant."

"That's pretty dominant."

"Well, they're massive, but on the other hand they lack unity. And the thing is, at Allekant, the research council has more power than the student council. In the research council, it takes two-thirds of the vote to pass a motion. So to get anything passed, they have to ally themselves with another faction. Before, they had been teaming up with Tenorio, a faction that focuses on bioenhancement. But a few years ago, Tenorio apparently made some huge blunder that caused them to fall out of favor. So recently, Ferrovius formed an alliance with Pygmalion."

This all sounded very complicated, Ayato thought. "What's Pygmalion's research focus?"

"Cybernetics and Puppets, I think."

That made sense. So it really was Ernesta who made the dolls that Silas controlled. And the fact that some of those dolls had been designed specifically to fight against Julis and Lester proved that Ernesta already had some data on them. Maybe "mastermind" was not such a bad description after all.

"So, I have a basic question," Ayato said. "Why do Allekant students participate in research? Wouldn't it be more efficient to just leave that to their IEF and let the students concentrate on the Festa?"

"Well, I think it comes down to compatibility. Genestella are far better suited to doing research involving mana and prana. In fact, most of the famous scientists in meteoric engineering are Genestella. If you're going to recruit Genestella scientists, why not educate and develop them, too? That's Allekant's MO."

"That seems like a lot to ask…"

"Actually, when they started out, Allekant was just as weak as Queenvale," Eishirou explained. "But as soon as the student researchers started producing results, they became one of the strongest schools in no time. Besides, if you want to go into research, no other school will give you the freedom that Allekant does."

"Huh. Wait, hold on…" Ayato realized that they were taking a different route than usual.

They had gone through the high school building toward the walkway to the middle school building.

"Hey, Yabuki, isn't the cafeteria the other way?"

"Well, you said you were buying. So why not make the most of it?" Eishirou, who was walking in front, turned to give Ayato a mischievous grin. "I thought we could live it up at Le Maurice today."

"What?!"

Le Maurice was the most expensive place to eat on the Seidoukan campus. It was situated at the edge of a wooded area somewhat removed from the school buildings. Lunch there would cost at least three times as much as at the Ursa Major dining hall where they usually ate.

"Information from other schools takes effort to gather and fact-check," Eishirou pointed out. "This is a good deal for you, trust me."

"Oh, all right…" Having made the suggestion himself, Ayato

didn't see a way out of it. Sighing in resignation, he took out his wallet to check the contents. It was possible to pay electronically at almost any business in Asterisk, but he rarely did so. It wasn't really his style.

"Ooh."

"Whoa!"

Eishirou had stopped suddenly, and Ayato—who had been recounting his cash with the faint hope that there might be more than he thought—almost bumped into Eishirou's back. "Hey, careful. What's going on?" Ayato asked.

"I just saw something for a possible story is all." Eishirou's eyes shone like a child's upon finding a new toy.

Following his gaze, Ayato saw two figures standing behind a pillar in the connecting hallway. And he recognized them.

"Hey, that's…"

It was the same girl he'd slammed into in the same walkway, and the middle-aged man she had called her uncle.

They were far enough away that Ayato couldn't make out what they were saying, but it didn't seem to be a friendly chat. While it looked short of a full-on argument, the tension was palpable.

"Heh, who'd have thought I'd pick up a scoop on Kirin Toudou in a place like this. I must have racked up some good karma!" Eishirou had already taken out a worn notebook from his pocket and started scribbling away without looking down at his pen.

"You know that girl?" Ayato wasn't sure how Eishirou might have racked up any good karma, but he was curious about her.

Eishirou's writing hand paused as he looked back at Ayato in shock. "Are you serious?"

"Uh, why wouldn't I be?"

"Well, you know, Kirin Toudou happens to be our—"

Eishirou got that far into his sentence when a dry slap rang out.

The man had just struck the girl across the cheek with his open hand. "I thought I told you that's not your concern, Kirin."

"But Uncle, I…"

"Did I give you permission to speak?" The man raised his hand again, and Kirin flinched.

"That's enough of that." Before the older man could bring down his hand, Ayato was there between them.

Kirin's eyes went round with surprise.

"Who are *you*?" the man demanded, scowling. His eyes looked

down on Ayato with a chilly contempt, and his voice dripped with undisguised hostility.

"I may not know the details here, but I don't think you should raise your hand against a defenseless girl," Ayato said.

The man smiled derisively. "Don't make me laugh. You and your lot are here fighting for your own greed. And you're going to lecture me?"

"We're not just fighting. We're competing. And that's not the same as one-sided violence."

The man glowered down, meaning to intimidate him, but Ayato faced him evenly.

The two glared at each other for some time. Finally, the man shook off Ayato's hand with a sniff. "I was just disciplining her. This is a family matter. Stay out of it."

"Family…?" Ayato studied the man more closely.

He seemed to be in his early forties, and he had a strong build, confirming Ayato's earlier impression. He was quite tall, though maybe not as tall as Lester, and beneath his well-tailored, dark brown suit were sturdy shoulders and a broad chest. The man carried himself in a way that hinted at a background in martial arts, but he was not a Genestella.

"My name is Kouichirou Toudou. Kirin Toudou is my niece."

Ayato turned to look at Kirin, who looked frightened, but nodded all the same.

"Now get out of here, boy. It's not as if a little slap can really do any damage to you Genestella."

"That may be true, but we still feel pain."

At those words, Kirin looked up at Ayato with a gasp.

Then she opened her mouth as if to speak—but her eyes wavered with indecision, and she swallowed the words she was about to say.

Kouichirou, meanwhile, wore a sneer of displeasure. "You've got some mouth on you for a student. What's your name?"

"Ayato Amagiri."

Kouichirou took out his mobile device from his pocket and handled it with a practiced precision to open an air-window. "Amagiri, eh? A nobody," he scoffed. "Not even in the Named Chart."

Apparently it didn't take him long to get a handle on Ayato's identity. But then the condescending disappointment in his face

suddenly turned to something more serious.

"Hmm, so you have the Ser Veresta. I suppose you're not completely worthless…" Kouichirou looked down at Ayato with a confident smile. "Very well, boy. If you disapprove of my actions, tell me what you'd have me do."

"Huh?"

"I'm willing to hear you out. Speak your mind." Kouichirou self-importantly crossed his arms.

Ayato hesitated, but only for a moment, before he spoke clear and firm. "Can you promise never to strike her again?"

"Fine. I will." Kouichirou nodded magnanimously and a cruel smile spread across his face. "But only if you win in a duel."

"A duel…?"

"Uncle! Please don't!" Kirin protested in surprise, but Kouichirou paid her no attention as he continued:

"That's right. That is the rule here in this city—the rule *you* lot abide by, isn't it?"

"Yes, that's true. It is our rule. But it doesn't apply to you, does it?" Ayato could be fairly certain that Kouichirou was not a student here. "And you don't seem to be a Genestella, so—"

"Of course not!" Kouichirou cut him off with a bellow. "How dare you suggest I'm one of you monsters!"

Glaring at Ayato, he walked behind Kirin and placed his hand on her slender shoulder. "*This* is your opponent."

"Wha—?!" Ayato was dumbfounded. *What kind of logic is that?*

"Don't worry. I won't demand anything from you if you lose."

"No, that's not the issue…!" The problem with this went deeper than winning or losing.

"Uncle! I—"

Kouichirou shut down Kirin's protest. "Shut up. Just do as I tell you."

"B-but—"

As Kirin held her ground, Kouichirou turned to fix her with a bone-chilling stare. "Kirin. Would you disobey me?"

A deep, dark voice full of overpowering force.

Ayato saw Kirin's heart and body wither in terror. "No…I would never…"

"Good. If you can beat the Ser Veresta, that'll gain you a measure of prestige. I expect you will." With that, Kouichirou turned away from her and calmly moved away to a safe distance.

He left Kirin to stare at the ground and bite her lip.

At a loss, Ayato scratched his head.

A few students had already noticed the commotion, and they were pausing to stare from afar. A good number of the student body here had a knack for rubbernecking.

Ayato looked desperately to Eishirou, who stood at the front of the gathering crowd. Eishirou responded with a broad grin and a thumbs-up. It was clear that he would be providing no help at all.

Ayato let out a deep sigh and turned to Kirin. "Um, Miss Toudou? I—"

"I'm so sorry." Kirin interrupted him with a trembling voice, her face still downcast.

"Huh?"

"I, Kirin Toudou…challenge you, Ayato Amagiri, to a duel."

In response, both Ayato's and Kirin's school crests glowed a bright red.

"Why do I have to fight you?!" Ayato shook his head in confusion.

Kirin only moved forward, looking miserable. "I don't want to fight you, either. But we have no choice."

"No choice?"

"I have a wish. And to make it come true, I have to do as my uncle says…" Her voice was full of barely contained emotion. But *just* barely—she could not entirely hide her sorrow. "Please. If you decline, this will be over. Please."

Ayato thought for a few moments, then looked straight into Kirin's eyes. "If I decline, what about you?"

"Huh?"

"What'll happen to you?"

Kirin turned away from his searching gaze. "I… That doesn't matter. No one can change anything for me."

"Then I can't back down, either," Ayato declared evenly.

He knew it was completely absurd. To duel the person he was trying to help—that went beyond even defeating the purpose.

Still, he couldn't just stand idly by and do nothing for a girl who would describe the scene of moments ago—such unfair treatment—as something that no one could change.

"I see… You're so kind, Mr. Amagiri." With a weak, sad smile, Kirin reached for the scabbard at her waist. "Then I have no choice. And I will not lose."

In that instant, he felt goose bumps rise all over his skin. His body seemed to move of its own accord as he took a giant leap back from Kirin.

Her expression—conflicted, on the verge of tears—never changed as she smoothly drew her sword.

He had guessed this earlier, but it was not a Lux. The construction was a modern style, but it was unmistakably a Japanese katana.

There was no mana response, so she was not a Strega, either. He could feel a highly refined prana from her, but that was not what had made him jump back.

A sharp and cool force, something akin to the presence of a sword, emanated from Kirin, who held her katana pointed straight at him. Ayato had never before sensed anything of the kind.

"Well…I can't exactly yield, either," Ayato murmured, then touched the school crest on his chest. "I accept your challenge."

He channeled prana into his body and focused it. His instincts told him that he could not face this girl without his full strength. His prana heightened, and sparks of light materialized around him, followed by magic circles.

He ignored the sharp pains that shot through him to *imagine* the binding—the cage and shackles that held him, the power swelling from his inner self to rend them apart…

*"By the sword within me, I break free of this prison of stars and unchain my power!"*

Instantly the magic circles around him were blown away. His sealed prana was released and strength flooded his body.

Kirin's eyes widened as she looked on, but the blade she held did not waver.

"Kirin, don't cross blades with that Orga Lux. It will cut through your katana and everything else," Kouichirou called out, as Ayato drew the Ser Veresta from its holder and activated it. It seemed that Kirin's uncle was quite knowledgeable regarding the sword's powers.

Still, one of the advantages of this Orga Lux was that even full knowledge did not make it any easier to face.

Ayato held the Ser Veresta in the same fighting stance as Kirin, mirroring her. *Let's try a light intimidation move to see what she can do…*

“Here I come!” Kirin said curtly, interrupting his thoughts, and in the next moment, her blade was rushing at his chest.

Half a gasp left him as he jumped back reflexively, and just when he’d barely evaded the first stroke, her katana swept relentlessly upward in pursuit.

She was fast. *Extraordinarily* fast.

Ayato tried to block the second blow with the Ser Veresta, but in the last instant, Kirin’s blade changed trajectory. The katana inscribed an arc in midair to evade the Ser Veresta and flew down toward his right forearm.

Ayato released his right hand from his sword to dodge the strike, then with his left hand alone, repositioned the Ser Veresta while drawing back from his opponent.

Kirin changed her stance, now holding her katana high.

“You’re very strong, Mr. Amagiri. I’m impressed.” There was genuine praise in her voice.

“Well, same to you…” Ayato felt a chill on his spine.

He had expected her to be a formidable fighter, but now he realized that in terms of speed, she was just as fast—or even faster—than he was with his full power.

“Oh man, now what…”

He seemed to have landed himself in even more trouble than he had imagined.

*

The gazebo in the corner of the courtyard was the one place on this campus where Julis was able to find calm.

During the lunch recess and after school, and whenever she had some time to kill, she came here. Recently, she had found herself socializing more, but habits would not change so easily.

And after that exchange with Saya the day before, she was eating alone today. She finished her lunch early and headed out of the courtyard, checking the news on her mobile.

“Hmm…so the Holy Grail has found a user…,” she murmured to herself. “They probably won’t fight in the Phoenix, but still, that could be trouble down the road… And this scythe fighter from Le Wolfe sounds interesting, too… Hmm? Breaking news?”

She noticed an alert scrolling across the air-window, which she had shrunk to the size of her palm.

"Kirin Toudou in a duel? Now, that *is* big news. Who's her opponent…?"

Just then, she heard cheering nearby. She looked toward the source of the noise to see a large crowd gathered beyond a connecting hallway. "Hmm?"

Julis thought she caught a familiar name amid the shouts, and an unpleasant premonition came over her.

She pushed her way through the crowd to reach the front, and what she saw there made her doubt her own eyes.

"Wh-wh-wha—?!" Her voice rushed out before it even knew what syllables to make.

The boy who was her tag team partner was there fighting Kirin Toudou, of all people.

*That imbecile! I just told him yesterday not to get in any needless duels before the Festa—!*

Julis was about to cover her face in frustration when a familiar figure caught her eye.

A certain boy who had placed himself in the perfect position to observe the fight was merrily operating a handheld camcorder. Julis stalked right up to him and grabbed him by the collar. "*What* is the meaning of this, Yabuki?!"

"Whoa, what—?! Oh, hey, Princess." Eishirou looked up from his camera in surprise but then quickly pointed it back to the fight. "Sorry, but I'm in the middle of som—"

"No, you're going to tell me what's going on!" Julis forcefully turned Eishirou away from the spectacle, camera and all. "I've got a bone to pick with you for feeding Sasamiya drivel about me and Ayato. And I won't hesitate to roast you like a chicken."

"Okay, okay. Your wish is my command, Your Highness." Resigned, Eishirou let out a long sigh and awkwardly scratched the scar on his cheek. "Well, not much to tell. It all started when in this hallway— Whoa!"

He suddenly leaned in toward the fight, and Julis automatically turned to look.

Ayato dodged Kirin's stroke by a fraction of an inch. The katana had swung upward just in front of Ayato's forehead, close enough that a few pieces of his hair floated away on the breeze.

Julis exhaled in relief and wiped away a bead of sweat on her

forehead.

"Man, this is great," Eishirou gushed. "You don't see a match like this every day—not even in the Festa. Amagiri was completely hiding his strength."

"But it doesn't look too good for him."

"Well, no surprise there. Even if he does have the Ser Veresta, he's still up against the Keen-Edged Tempest."

As Eishirou said that, Ayato crouched to avoid a viciously fine sword stroke that went just above his head.

Ayato swung the Ser Veresta from that position as if to sweep at Kirin's feet, but she had already moved, a breath ahead of his attack. From her backward leap, she instantly sprang again to close the distance and swung down before Ayato could regain his stance.

He dodged the strike with a roll then pushed himself back up with one hand.

Even if one wasn't close enough to see the sweat on his brow or the strained expression on his face, it was obvious that Ayato was at a disadvantage.

Julis had a hard time believing it. He had clearly released his power, and she knew firsthand his abilities in that state. They had been training daily, and she was finally able to follow the way he moved and wielded his weapon. Even so, once he got her within his range, he could beat her in an instant.

As far as she could tell, Kirin was not fighting him with anything less than her full strength. Still, it was amazing to Julis that she could fight so well against Ayato.

"And all this without their blades meeting even once…?"

Indeed, Kirin had evaded all of Ayato's attacks without using her sword to parry or block.

That was the correct strategy against the Ser Veresta, a sword famed for cutting through anything in its path. Kirin was fighting not with a Lux, but with a conventional katana. If she tried to parry with that, it would be ruined instantly.

The amazing thing was that Kirin managed to avoid the Orga Lux even when attacking.

Of course, Ayato was trying to block her attacks with the Ser Veresta, but she appeared to be changing the trajectory of her strokes in the last moment—without slowing the speed of her blade.

"But then again, it looks like Amagiri doesn't seem to be handling his sword that well," Eishirou said. "Take away that

disadvantage, though, and who knows?"

Julis was surprised at this assessment. "Not handling it well? The Ser Veresta?"

"I don't know anything about the Amagiri style, but I'm guessing it was never meant for a sword that big. A sword like that demands big, wide strokes, and you can't maneuver very easily with it."

"I see…"

Julis hadn't noticed, since Ayato's technique was unusually fast to begin with. Now that Eishirou pointed it out, though, the Ser Veresta *was* much too large for the way he moved. In light of its destructive power, that wouldn't seem to be such a shortcoming at first glance. But against an opponent with the skills to take advantage of it…

Those thoughts went through her mind, and then Julis looked up at Eishirou in sudden realization: *He can see all that…?*

Even for Julis, who was ranked fifth at Seidoukan, it was still difficult to completely follow Ayato's movements at his full strength. So it was dubious that very many among the assembled crowd had a good grasp of the fight.

*True, it's easier to follow his movements as a spectator than as an opponent, but still…*

Either Eishirou had very sharp eyes, or—

Julis cut off her own thoughts. "Wait. Never mind that. How long have they been dueling?"

"Huh? I think just four or five minutes. Why?"

The color drained from her face.

That meant Ayato could remain at full strength for only three more minutes at the very most.

It was bad enough that his full strength was now public knowledge, but if people knew that it came with a time limit…that would be the worst possible scenario.

Julis thought for a moment about barging in and nullifying the duel, but such an action would have serious repercussions for herself.

"Oh, hey, it looks like Amagiri's going for it now," Eishirou remarked.

As if he had read her thoughts, Ayato, who had been entirely on the defensive, began to attack. He stepped in past the katana attacks, even more closely than before, and swung the Ser Veresta

straight across.

Still, Kirin was one step ahead of him.

Dodging with a light step, she brought her blade down diagonally, faster than Ayato could pull back his weapon to block. He barely escaped, but his uniform was cleanly sliced open.

"Ooh, this doesn't look good for him."

"He was barely holding on as it was," Julis argued. "I wouldn't think going on the offensive was such a bad decision."

Eishirou shook his head. "That's not what I mean. He's giving himself even less margin for error to dodge her attacks."

"Again, I don't think that's a bad thing. That means he's keeping good track of what his opponent's sword is doing."

"Well, normally, I'd agree with you, buuut…"

"Just what is it that you want to say?" Julis fussed at him.

Eishirou gave her a knowing smile. "He fought Your Highness right after he transferred, but he hasn't really been in any other duels, right?"

"And what does that have to do—"

Then Julis finally understood what he wanted to tell her.

She looked back in a panic toward the duel. Ayato had just stepped closer inside Kirin's reach.

With a shout, he swung down the Ser Veresta, but it cut through nothing but air.

In the next instant, Kirin countered with a one-handed thrust that grazed the left side of his torso—again, the blade missed him by less than the previous attack did.

The extended edge flashed, then it turned to slice upward at his chest.

With a grunt, Ayato leaned back to dodge the attack, and as he recovered his stance—

*"End of duel! Winner: Kirin Toudou!"*

He stared blankly as the AI announcement rang out. He apparently had no idea what had just happened.

But then, as if catching on, he looked down at the left side of his chest. "…Oh."

Ayato's school crest had been sliced perfectly in two.

"Ugh, he is just unbelievable," Julis muttered and rolled her eyes skyward.

This was the obvious result of him losing sight of the crest and trying to dodge Kirin's attacks while accounting for only the meat of

his body in his calculations.

"Yup. That's a pretty common mistake, you know, for people who learned to fight on the outside but aren't used to dueling here." Eishirou gave Julis a helpless smile and patted her shoulder.

"Hmph. Finally. Let's go." Kouichirou nodded with the air of a man who had been certain of the outcome all along. With one glance at Kirin, he walked back toward the school building.

He seemed to have already lost all interest in Ayato.

"Y-yes. Coming, Uncle!" Kirin sheathed her katana and bowed politely to Ayato. "Um, I…I'm sorry!"

And then she was running after her uncle with her dainty steps.

"Wai—" Ayato began to call out to her, only to think better of it.

He had lost. He did not have the right to interfere.

That was the rule here, in this school—this city.

As he let out a long sigh, someone tapped him on the shoulder. He turned to see Julis glaring at him, looking every bit as furious as she had yesterday.

Except that she was right there in front of him, instead of in an air-window. The difference in impact was tremendous.

"I have a great many things to say to you and questions to ask. But first, let's get out of here. You must not have much time left."

She was absolutely right, and when Julis pulled him by the hand, Ayato went obediently along with her.

"And once we're somewhere safe," she went on, "you are going to tell me everything. Starting with what possible reason you could have for dueling the *number one ranked student* at this school!"

# CHAPTER 4
# COMPLICATING EXPECTATIONS

Kirin plodded behind Kouichirou, her head down. The restricted passageway they took led to a campus gateway for the exclusive use of those with connections to the school.

There was no one else in the passageway and no sound but his shrill, brisk footsteps.

The sound came to a sudden halt. “That took you longer than I expected,” Kouichirou rumbled, without even turning to face her.

Kirin flinched. She tried to reply, and her mouth only fumbled without forming words. “I—I’m sorry, Uncle,” she finally managed, in a voice so faint it almost disappeared into the air.

“He *was* skilled, I’ll give you that. But don’t let yourself take so much time with a student who’s not even in the Named Charts—even if he is an Orga Lux user. Your reputation will suffer,” he went on curtly, still facing forward. “In the next round of ranking matches, number seven will probably challenge you. He’s an Orga Lux user as well, but you will defeat him quickly, not like today. Three minutes, no more.”

Then Kouichirou turned around at last. He took out his mobile device and opened an air-window displaying the data on the aforementioned student. “Look through this data later. We’ll take care of most of the Page One students within the year. That’s the first step. Then your ranking at Seidoukan will be secure. That Enfield girl should be the only one who will give us trouble.”

“Yes, Uncle,” Kirin replied quietly, her head down.

“And…I saw the midterm test results. Less than ideal, I have to say.” He opened a new air-window and pulled up Kirin’s test results

from the previous month.

All her scores were above average, most near the top of the class, but the dissatisfaction was plain on Kouichirou's face.

"Didn't I tell you not to slack off in your schoolwork, either?"

"…I'm sorry."

Kouichirou clicked his tongue in annoyance and seized Kirin by the hair, forcefully pulling her head up to face him.

"You listen to me. I expect more than brute strength from you. You will be a first-ranked student to go down in the history of Seidoukan. Don't you forget that…ever!" He held her by the chin to peer coolly into her eyes. "You're a slow-witted brat good for nothing but swordplay. But *I* can make something of you. Don't you ever forget that, Kirin. Without my perfect plan you won't get anywhere."

"Yes, Uncle… I know…," Kirin answered weakly, her eyes still downcast.

"Hmph," Kouichirou snorted. "If you do, you'll never disobey me again. Never talk back to me, not a single word. You will do nothing but follow my plan."

He shoved the girl away, and she fell to her knees. Sneering down at her, Kouichirou straightened the lapels of his suit. His gaze was filled with disgust, as if he looked at a smear of filth rather than a member of his own family.

"So far, everything is going according to my plan. Do everything in your power to make sure it stays that way. After all, the moment this plan is achieved is the moment when your wish comes true."

With a nasty smirk, Kouichirou headed for the gate, leaving Kirin there on the floor. The high clacking of his footsteps faded into the distance.

"Yes. I know…," whispered Kirin, alone on her knees in the dimly lit passageway.

*

"So that girl is ranked first in the whole school? Is that true?"

"Why would I lie about that?" Julis snapped. "And to think you don't know who the top-ranking student is in your own school! How clueless can you be?"

She was clearly irritated, but she plopped a cold, wet towel on Ayato's forehead as he lay on the floor. The cool sensation was a relief. He was now feverish and practically immobile after having broken his seal for so long.

They were in Julis's personal training room, which he had gotten to know quite well by now. This was the only private place they could think to take him, though with that gaping hole in the wall, it wasn't exactly private.

"Well, uh…I'm sorry." With no excuse for his ignorance, he could only apologize. But Julis scowled even more fiercely.

She seemed to be in a truly foul mood.

"Um, so you're mad at me…right?" Ayato asked timidly.

"Oh?" She impaled him with a glare. "You say that as if you know you've done something to make me angry."

He had done a whole pile of things fitting that description. He did not say so.

Instead, he named the item that was probably at the top of the list: "Well, I did get into a duel."

After all, she had just told him the day before not to do that. He had already explained the gist of the situation, but the fact that she had not said a word in response made him only more nervous.

He was bracing himself for her to unleash a maelstrom.

"I don't care about that anymore."

"Huh?" Her reaction took him by surprise.

"That man, Kouichirou. His behavior is abhorrent. Uncle or not, he has no right to treat her like a tool." Her voice was calm and quiet, but pure rage blazed in her eyes. "If you had done nothing, I would have lost all faith in you. And if it were me who happened upon that scene, I would have done exactly as you did."

Julis was speaking from her heart, her unclouded honest feelings.

How very like her. Ayato couldn't help but smile. "Thanks. That means a lot to me."

As soon as he told her how he felt, though, a blush began to spread across her face. "Wh— You have no reason to thank me! I—I only…" The rest of her sentence trailed off into an unintelligible mumble. "Anyway, that's not what I'm angry about!"

"Um, then what…?"

Seeing Ayato stumped, Julis let out a small sigh. "I'm in a bad mood because you lost," she mumbled, turning away.

“What?! But that’s—”

“I know! I know how selfish and unreasonable that is and that your opponent was number one, undefeated in Seidoukan. Even so, I thought you had a chance…!”

“Julis…” He had no idea that she thought so highly of him. He wanted to live up to her hopes. If only he could—

“But apparently, Kirin Toudou is so strong that even you can’t beat her,” Julis said.

“It hurts to admit it, but she’s better with a sword than I am.”

This was an indisputable fact. Her shy demeanor seemed at odds with that incredible swordsmanship, but for speed, precision, everything—she matched or exceeded Ayato at his full strength. He could hardly imagine the training she must have endured.

“I see…” Julis leaned back against the wall with a sardonic laugh. “But I suppose I should be praising her. After all, she’s only thirteen years old—in her first year of middle school. She enrolled this April, and on her first day, she dueled the student ranked eleven and won. In her first official match, she defeated the former number one. Saying she’s got potential is an understatement in the extreme.”

“Th-thirteen?!” Ayato nearly jumped up in surprise and winced at the pain when he tried.

She wore the middle school uniform, so he’d known that she was younger than him—but he had not guessed that she might be a *first-year* in middle school.

That made her prowess even more inconceivable. Not just her sword technique, but the way she moved, how she judged the range of the opponent’s attack, all the immediate, tiny judgment calls she made in the midst of battle—in every possible aspect, Kirin operated at an immensely high level.

*And she’s awfully well-developed for thirteen…*

His brain conjured up images of her physical proportions, which seemed rather advanced for her age. Ayato violently shook them out of his head.

“Hmm? What is it?”

“Oh, um, nothing,” he said, brushing off the inquisitive look from Julis. “Anyway, do you know any more about her?”

Julis scowled again. “Sounds like she’s piqued your interest.”

She was right, so he nodded, though he had no idea why this seemed to put her in a bad mood again. “W-well, yeah. Kind of.”

“Hmph. I see. Fine,” she said, sounding almost bored, then took out her mobile and opened an air-window. It displayed the names of twelve students—the Page Ones, those on the first page of the Named Chart. “As I said earlier, there are a number of fighters stronger than me. If we restrict the conversation to students at this school, there are three, I believe, against whom I currently stand no chance: you, Claudia, and Kirin Toudou.”

“Claudia, too?” It was unusual for Julis to openly admit falling short to Claudia, Ayato thought.

“I don’t like it, but that’s the reality. She’s strong. She may not look it, but she’s our second-ranked fighter.”

“Wow…I had no idea.” He remembered hearing that she was a Page One, but he hadn’t known where on the page she fell.

“You really… Well, you didn’t know who number one was, so it shouldn’t surprise me that you didn’t know number two, either.” Nonplussed, Julis shrugged, then flicked at the air-window to set it spinning. “Claudia Enfield, known as the Commander of a Thousand Visions, Parca Morta. She uses the Pan-Dora, an Orga Lux with the power of precognition.”

“Precognition? You mean she can see the future?”

“I don’t know much more than that. They say she’s the only one able to wield the Pan-Dora,” Julis went on, looking grave. “Rumor has it that she can probably see into the future by twenty or thirty seconds or more. But that’s only speculation by those who have seen her fight.”

“That would make her incredibly strong.” If she knew all of her opponent’s moves, even just twenty seconds ahead, she had to be close to invincible.

“And that’s why there are almost no students who would challenge Claudia. I don’t want you challenging her to a duel, either.”

Ayato laughed nervously and scratched his cheek, but something occurred to him as he watched the air-window spin like a top. “Wait… If Kirin is first and Claudia is second… You’re ranked fifth, right? You’re not including third and fourth on your list?”

“I must have told you this before, but rank doesn’t always reflect strength. The third-and fourth-ranked students—number four in particular is a formidable Dante, but my powers match up well with his. If I fought him ten times, I would probably win five times. On the other hand, I can have much poorer odds facing a specific

lower-ranked fighter. Number seven, for instance, is an Orga Lux user, so I'd be lucky to win three times out of ten." Then Julis pinched the spinning air-window to stop it. "But you, Claudia, and Kirin Toudou are in a different class. I couldn't beat any one of you a single time out of ten. That's what I mean when I say I have no chance."

"I see…," Ayato said.

"Kirin Toudou has never lost since coming to this school. Neither has Claudia. But what sets Kirin apart from you and Claudia is that she is neither an Orga Lux user nor a Strega."

And Kirin didn't use a Lux at all, but a conventional Japanese sword. She seemed very well attuned to it, Ayato thought, so it had to be her weapon of choice.

"I know I said that the rankings don't mean everything, but still, number one is special. They become the face of the school, and competition for the spot is fierce. They're challenged at virtually every official match, so only an extraordinary fighter can hold the spot. The fact that she's defended her rank with just a katana, even if only for three months—it's unheard of. In fact, the top spot in every other school is held either by an Orga Lux wielder or a Strega." Julis snapped her fingers and the air-window disappeared. "Well, those are my thoughts on Kirin Toudou. If you're looking for more personal information, ask Yabuki. I don't deal in gossip."

"Thanks, Julis. That was plenty."

Truth be told, Ayato wanted to know more about Kirin's uncle, but that was not something to ask Julis.

"Then let's talk about the Phoenix," she said.

"The Phoenix?" Puzzled, Ayato cocked his head.

Julis gave him a thin smile of strained patience. "Now that everyone knows about your real power, we need a change of plans."

"Oh, right…"

They had managed to keep his time limit a secret, but Ayato's prowess would have been obvious to anyone who saw him fight Kirin head-on. There had been quite a crowd gathered around the duel. The videos were most likely already circulating.

Which meant that most of his skills were now public knowledge. Their previous plan, which had relied on their opponents not knowing about Ayato's true strength, was now useless.

"Sorry," he apologized, dejected.

“No need to make a face like that. It wasn’t going to be a secret forever,” replied Julis, ruffling his hair. “Well, it might have been better if you’d won—but there’s no point in dwelling on that now.”

“How would things be different if I won?”

“Well, then you would have been the new top-ranked student. That would give us better odds of having an easier spot on the Phoenix board.”

“An easier spot…? Oh, you mean in the tournament matchups.”

The matchups were not random, but were heavily influenced by the planning committee’s calculations to maximize public interest in the Festa. They manipulated the tournament in specific ways—for instance, favored teams were spread out, so that they would duel in later rounds rather than knocking one another out of the tournament early.

“I’m ranked fifth, so that has some influence, but you’re unlisted right now. Even if your skills became known by fighting Kirin, without official standing to back them up, you won’t be considered a favorite. If you were a former Page One, things might be different.”

“Oh. I get it…”

“Even if you wanted to try for a high ranking, the official matches for this month are already over. And I doubt anyone would be interested in dueling at this point…”

It was said that the planning committee waited until the last possible minute to make the bracket, in part to prevent any dishonest conduct such as throwing matches. So it would make sense for them to take into account late changes in the rankings, but without any opponents, there wouldn’t be much Ayato could do to change his.

“Well, don’t worry about that too much. Just keep it in mind in case an opportunity does come up,” Julis said, lightly tapping Ayato’s head.

*

The next day after class, Ayato headed to the student services counter at the Committee Center. He had to get a new school crest, since his had been broken in the duel against Kirin.

The school crest also functioned as a student ID, used at

security checkpoints and to take attendance. It was too inconvenient to try to live with a broken crest. When he'd applied for a new one first thing that morning, they had told him to pick it up after school.

"Oh yes. You can get your crest in person from the student council president," the woman at the counter said in an extremely bureaucratic voice, then took out several forms. "Please sign here and here."

"Uh, okay… The president? So I should go see Claudia?"

"Yes. We've been told she will be waiting in the student council lounge."

"The lounge…?"

Ayato had no idea where it was, but before he had a chance to ask, the service window's shutter came firmly down.

With nothing to go on, he decided to try the top floor of the high school building. His body ached all over, but not enough to hinder normal activity. Julis had given him the day off from training, so he had time.

"Well, all the rooms related to the student council seem to be up on that floor, so I can probably find it," he told himself.

The windows showed a pleasantly clear summer sky. Indoors, it was air-conditioned and comfortable, but one step outside and it was an inferno under the scorching sun. He would rather avoid going outside until after sunset.

Thinking idly along those lines, Ayato looked for the lounge and found it with surprising ease. It was just two doors down from the council room on the corner, but even before entering, he could tell that it would be quite spacious.

There was an intercom at the door, so he pressed the button to be greeted immediately by Claudia's voice. "Welcome, Ayato. Please come in."

Ayato obeyed, and whatever luxury he might have expected did not prepare him for what he saw. A small tropical paradise spread out before him.

In the middle of the room was a pool, surrounded here and there by plants he didn't often see—palm trees and cycads. The walls were all glass, letting the sun shine in bright and strong.

At the poolside, there was a single white deck chair, where Claudia reclined. She seemed to be at work with several air-windows.

“Um, wow, this is…”

“Did the room surprise you?” Claudia closed the displays all at once and unhurriedly sat up.

Ayato froze at seeing her fully.

Claudia was in a swimsuit, which fit her surroundings. But the design of the suit was much too bold for Ayato. To be fair, it was a perfectly fine design, and she wore the bikini-style well. The figure of the woman beneath the suit, however, was so captivating that he did not know where to look.

Simply put, too much of his field of vision was taken over by naked skin.

“This room was made on the orders of one of my predecessors a few terms back. It was quite a waste of resources, but changing it back would also be a financial drain, so we’ve continued to use it.”

“I—I see…”

Claudia noticed Ayato averting his eyes and laughed softly.

“B-but there’s a lake right outside,” Ayato said. “Why would someone make an indoor pool?”

“Oh, you don’t know? Swimming in the lake is prohibited.”

“Huh? Really?”

“This area has a high concentration of mana. Several mutants have been discovered.”

Mutants were animals and plants that had mutated due to the effects of mana since the Invertia. Humans had mutated, too—the result, of course, being Genestella—so it followed that other organisms were no exception. So far, however, there were no reports of mutants that posed a threat to humans, nor of mutants like Genestella whose abilities differed significantly from the original species.

“It’s only a rumor for now, since no live specimens have been captured, but there are reports of a giant shadow in the water and sightings of monsters in the underground sectors.” Claudia laughed. “Scary, isn’t it?”

She got up from the deck chair and crept close to Ayato, spreading her arms wide and mimicking a growling monster. *“Grar!”*

He did not seem to find it scary at all. Rather, the motion set her breasts bouncing, which made the question of where to look even more difficult for him.

“M-maybe they were just freaked out and imagining things?” he

said weakly.

"Oh? You're more of a realist than I thought." Claudia's shoulders shook with quiet laughter, but then she clapped her hands, remembering something. "That's right. This is why you're here, isn't it, Ayato?"

With that, she handed him his brand-new school crest.

"Oh yeah. Thanks, Claudia. But…where did that come from?"

He hadn't seen it near her. Her hands had been empty just a moment ago.

"It's a secret," she replied with a giggle.

"…A secret, huh?" He got a bad feeling about that and decided not to pursue the matter.

"I was surprised, though," she remarked. "I never imagined you would duel Miss Toudou."

"There were reasons why I didn't have a choice at the time," he said succinctly, guessing that Claudia already had a good grasp of the circumstances.

"You mean…Miss Toudou's uncle?"

Ayato looked up at her with a short intake of breath. "Claudia, you know about him?"

"Of course. He is quite a bit of trouble." Claudia slowly went to the pool, where she dipped her foot into the water. Ayato had no choice but to follow. "Mm, that feels very nice. Do you want to come in, Ayato?"

"But I'm in my uniform."

"You could take it off."

"Um, I don't have a swimsuit, though."

"I don't mind. All the better, actually."

"Well, *I* mind! Anyway, Claudia, can we—"

She covered her mouth and laughed at his impatient prodding. "Yes, I know. Miss Toudou's uncle, right?"

Then her usually cheerful expression soured.

"Her uncle, Kouichirou Toudou, works for Galaxy, the integrated enterprise foundation that backs Seidoukan Academy. His position there is manager of the Seventh Division's Educational Research Office of Integrated Entertainment Operations. He supervises scouting operations in the Far East. The Educational Research Office is effectively in charge of our school's scouting, which has a strong influence on our performance in the Festa. He holds considerable authority."

“So he’s a bigwig?”

“Hmm, not quite, I think. Better to say he’s a candidate for an executive position,” Claudia replied with her forefinger at her chin. “And Mr. Toudou does seem fully intent on gaining an executive seat. He seems to be very actively using his niece for that purpose. I hear that he’s completely in charge of choosing the opponents and schedule for her duels.”

“Using her? I knew it. So she *is* being forced to fight against her will—”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that,” Claudia flatly contradicted him. “She seems to have her own reasons. The more noteworthy thing is his tactics. It is true that if a student he favors does well, it could serve as a foothold for a promotion. But it’s rare for someone to become so invested in a single student. The risk of harm to one’s career if the student fails is too great. And because she is his family, the criticism would be far greater. Even so, that is exactly what Mr. Toudou is doing.”

“He must be very confident in Miss Toudou’s skill,” Ayato said.

Claudia nodded happily. “Good, Ayato. Very insightful. I’d expect nothing less.”

“Well, she did kind of destroy me in the duel.”

“Oh? I thought it was a quite a match,” Claudia offered, clearly fishing.

Ayato did not answer, but only smiled uncomfortably.

“Well, in any case,” she went on, “I doubt Mr. Toudou will have much luck achieving an executive rank—regardless of how his niece fares.”

“Why do you say that?” he wondered. She had only just said that Kirin’s performance could become a foothold for a promotion.

“Mr. Toudou is too focused on personal concerns.”

“Huh?”

“Individuals who are selfishly motivated can climb only so far in the IEFs. Not just at Galaxy—the same is also true at the others, like Jie Long and Frauenlob.” Claudia scooped up water in her hand and let it trickle down. The thin streams sparkled in the sunlight, making Ayato squint. “Only those who undergo several stages of a mental adjustment program to completely eliminate their self-interest can ever reach the rank of IEF executive. That’s why there are virtually no examples of wrongdoing involving executives. They have tremendous authority, but they exist only to serve the

enormous beast that is their integrated enterprise foundation."

"You know a lot about it," Ayato remarked. The inner workings of IEFs, especially pertaining to important personages such as executives, were generally top secret.

"Yes. My mother is one."

"Your mother?" Ayato said, startled. He had guessed that Claudia was from a well-to-do family, but not that she might be the daughter of an IEF executive.

Given the world they lived in, some might say that placed her in a higher social class than Julis, an actual princess.

"It can be very entertaining to see executives gather in one room. They all seem like the same person. Even I couldn't tell which one was my mother." Her voice rang with laughter.

*Is that something to laugh about?* thought Ayato.

"Oh, by the way…" Striking her palm, Claudia abruptly changed the subject. "I have heard that Miss Toudou is the daughter of the head family of the famous Toudou-style school. Did you know that, Ayato?"

"Oh…I didn't, but I recognized that style the second we started fighting."

The Toudou style was one of the most flourishing swordsmanship schools of the day. With an emphasis on spiritual strength and strict discipline, it was recommended for the mental training of young Genestella. There were many Genestella among its students, and it had several satellite dojos abroad. It operated on a vastly larger scale than Ayato's Amagiri Shinmei style.

And if Kirin was the daughter of the head family of the sword style, that certainly did something to explain her skill.

Claudia breathed out and sank her body into the pool as if letting herself be washed away. Then she dove deep like a fish with hardly a sound and surfaced toward the middle of the pool.

"So, what will you do now, Ayato?" There was something teasing in her voice.

Knowing perfectly well that she wasn't expecting an answer, Ayato only shrugged in reply.

*

"Kirin Toudou…"

He wasn't sure why, but she was on his mind a lot.

Of course, there was the issue of her uncle, but there was something else that stuck in his mind. It felt like there was something he had in common with her…but he couldn't say exactly what that was.

He reached the dorm in hazy contemplation and only then noticed that something was wrong. There was an odd level of commotion, a strange tension and excitement.

"Did something happen…?"

But as he took a step closer, the students around him began to murmur.

"He's here…"

"That's Amagiri…"

"So he's the one…"

"But *why*…?"

Ayato couldn't hear everything, but he sensed in their voices a conflicted mishmash of curiosity, jealousy, and pity.

"Huh? What?" He was looking around in utter confusion, when Eishirou popped his head out from the crowd.

His expression was that of a boy who'd just been having the time of his life. "Oh hey, Amagiri, took you long enough. You've got a guest."

"A guest? To see me?"

"Yup. I showed her to the visitors' lounge. C'mon, get going."

"Uh, okay…"

Rushed by Eishirou, Ayato headed to the visitors' lounge at the end of the common floor.

Feeling stares following him the whole way down the hall, Ayato recalled that something similar had happened to him before.

After his duel with Julis, when he came to the boys' dorm for the first time, he had been treated like this.

Then he realized:

*That means…*

"Oh… Please come in," a sweet voice called when he knocked.

*I knew it*, he thought as he opened the door.

The person perched somewhat nervously on the sofa of the visitors' lounge was none other than the top-ranked fighter of Seidoukan Academy—Kirin Toudou herself.

# CHAPTER 5
# HER TRUE FACE

"I—I'm so sorry about the other day!"

As soon as Ayato entered the visitors' lounge, Kirin hastily stood up from the sofa and bowed in apology.

"Oh, no— You don't have to apologize for anything…" Ayato waved his hands at her in denial.

The visitors' lounge of the boys' dormitory was not hugely spacious, maybe ten by fifteen feet, and it was simply furnished with nothing of note other than the leather furniture set. There were no real windows, only an environmental simulation screen displaying scenery.

"I'm the one who should apologize," Ayato said. "It looked like I complicated things."

"N-no, not at all—!" Kirin, her head still bowed, looked up just enough to read Ayato's expression. "Um… You're not angry with me?"

"Why would I be?"

Seeing his flustered smile, she finally relaxed a bit.

"Well, maybe with your uncle, there might be a thing or two for me to be angry about."

"Oh, I— I'm truly sorry for—"

"No, like I said, *you* don't have anything to apologize for."

Kirin bowed again, and Ayato scratched his head uncertainly. She was a good-natured girl, he could see that, but so incredibly timid. *And she's that strong in a fight… What a contradiction.*

Her eyes were full of tears, as if she'd start crying any second. Ayato placed his hand on her head and gently petted her. She made

a tiny sound.

It happened mostly without thinking on his part, but as her face went pink, he hastily pulled back his hand.

“Uh, so… You wanted to see me about something?”

“Huh?”

“You didn’t come all the way here just to apologize, did you?”

Now it was Kirin who looked blankly at him in confusion. “But I did.”

“Oh. Okay…”

Very timid and very conscientious, it would seem. Ayato thought he was beginning to understand her personality.

“But, er, not *only* that…” Suddenly she faced him straight on and bowed again deeply. “Um—thank you very much!”

“…Wha—?” Ayato blurted, entirely clueless. He had no more idea why he should be thanked than he had regarding her apology. “What are you thanking me for…?”

“Y-you barely know me, but you stood up to my uncle for me…! Even though things turned out how they did—I’m really grateful!” Her voice was high with effort, her face crimson.

Ayato weakly shook his head. “Don’t. I couldn’t even help you in the end.”

“But that’s—”

As Kirin began to protest, Ayato suddenly went serious and raised his forefinger in front of his lips. His glance fell on the door of the lounge.

Immediately catching on, Kirin quieted her breathing and signaled with her eyes that she understood.

Ayato made himself silent and crept to the door, then, with careful timing, pulled it open.

*"Aaugh!"*

The cluster of boys who had been leaning up against the door to eavesdrop all fell into the room in an avalanche.

Exasperated, Ayato addressed the boy at the very front of the pile—a person he knew. "Hard at work, huh, Yabuki?"

"Y-you know me," Eishirou said with a nervous laugh. A slight twitch in his face hinted that he knew he was caught doing something wrong.

Ayato had expected something like this, but Kirin clearly had not. She was utterly astonished.

"Let's keep talking outside, Miss Toudou," he offered. "I'll walk you back to your dorm."

"Oh… All right!" Kirin nodded anxiously.

*

"Sheesh, it's *still* hot outside."

The summer sky was vivid red in the twilight. The streetlights that had just turned on were scarcely functioning as intended, as if they, too, were painted over with that red.

Ayato and Kirin walked side by side along the promenade under the fiery glow and the falling dusk.

Kirin's face was also tinged red, but that was not entirely due to the light.

"Toudou, are you okay?" he asked.

"Huh? Oh, um, yes!"

"Are you…nervous?"

"I—I'm sorry," she replied with a bashful smile. "This is the first time I've ever walked like this with a man who isn't a family member."

"Wow."

"My da— My father is quite strict."

"I see…" It stood to reason that the head of the family of the Toudou style would be austere, he thought. "I've heard that the Toudou style is all about strict training, but that goes for your personal life, too, huh?"

“You know about our style?”

“Well, I do a bit of swordplay myself. There’s no way I wouldn’t know about the Toudou style. ‘Like folding a paper crane,’ they say, it’s so precise.”

Kirin’s face brightened at hearing the words Ayato had repeated so casually. “Speaking of styles, yours is an older one, isn’t it?”

“Huh? Yeah, it is, but…how could you tell?”

The Amagiri Shinmei style was hardly noteworthy, nothing that merited comparison to the Toudou style. Ayato didn’t think Kirin would have known of it.

“It was just a guess. When we dueled the other day, I noticed stances where you dropped your hips low.”

This surprised him.

It was true that the Amagiri Shinmei style had a long history—five hundred years since its founding. The sword-fighting styles from that time were developed with the weight of armor in mind, and as a rule, they incorporated fighting stances with the body carried low.

In contrast, the Toudou style was newer, founded at the end of the Edo period. It was designed for combat without armor and relied primarily on upright fighting stances. One was not necessarily superior to the other; in one-on-one unarmored contests like the duels in Asterisk, however, later styles had a slight but undeniable advantage in speed.

The Amagiri Shinmei style had incorporated aspects of unarmored styles through its long history. But trying to use the older techniques from its early days would naturally put one in an unfavorable position.

Kirin had seen right through that.

“You dragged your feet when moving from a defensive position, and the point of your blade was held quite high when you were in a low stance. These are both typical of older styles. I would have been able to learn more if our blades crossed, but that wasn’t really an option with your Ser Veresta… Oh, but that Orga Lux is amazing! Just by facing you, I could feel the flow of your prana. Being able to maintain that amount of—”

She had been speaking so excitedly that she was leaning in, her eyes sparkling. But then she cut herself off and pursed her lips, her face going bright red, and backed away in tiny steps.

“I…I…I’m so sorry. I just…got carried away…”

Seeing her so pitifully abashed, Ayato almost burst out laughing. She really did look like a small animal. So much so that it made him want to pet her head again. “You really love swordplay, don’t you, Toudou?”

To that question, she had a decisive reply. “Y-yes, I do!” But she stared straight ahead and continued a little sadly, “Because swordplay is the only thing I’m good at.”

“You shouldn’t—”

She stopped him mid-sentence, shaking her head. “No, it’s true. I’m not smart. I’m clumsy, I’m a coward, I’m not even good at cooking or anything. But when I pick up a sword, I can be useful to somebody. That’s what makes it fun and why I love it.”

“Oh…”

Her answer was clear and honest. There was nothing Ayato could say to that.

Still, he felt like there was a slight dissonance between what she wanted and what she did. It bothered him.

“And besides,” she said, “I have a wish that I want— No, I *have* to make it come true.”

“What’s that?”

“To help my father.” Her voice was quiet and forceful, as if she had to tell herself.

“That’s why you do everything your uncle says?”

Ayato wondered if he might be prying too deeply, but he cut to the heart of the matter because he simply had to know.

As he feared, the question seemed to take Kirin off guard—but then she nodded. “Unlike me…my uncle is very clever. He’s been kind enough to show me the best and shortest path to making my wish come true. I hardly deserve to be in the first rank. That would have been impossible if not for his help. And…I appreciate what he’s doing for me very much.”

“Even if he’s only using you to advance his career?”

Naturally, Kirin already knew that. She smiled fleetingly, unsurprised. “My uncle shows me the path to achieving my wish, and in the process, he reaps a corresponding reward—so you see, this is an equal exchange.”

“It didn’t look that way to me.” Ayato frowned, remembering the scene from the other day.

A relationship in which she was the target of senseless violence, with no way to resist, could not possibly be described as equal.

“My uncle hates Genestella,” she said simply.

*“So there’s nothing for it. I just have to bear it, and it’s fine.”* That was what the look in her eyes and her strained smile told him.

Ayato tried to say something and stopped himself. He had lost the duel. It wasn’t his place to get involved any further.

So he had to leave off here. At least for now.

“Oh, by the way… May I ask you something?” Kirin leaned in timidly to look at his face.

“Sure, what is it?” It was a blatant ploy to change the subject, he thought, but he might as well go along with it.

“How do you train usually, Amagiri?”

“Train?” It seemed like an odd question. “Um, in the mornings, I run and work on my forms. Then I practice sword strokes. Then, in the afternoons, I’m working with Julis on our tag team fighting, so…”

“Mm-hmm…”

Then Ayato noticed that Kirin was diligently taking notes.

On top of that, she began to ask for details. “How much do you run? Do you have a set route? Oh, and…”

Ayato saw now that she wasn’t simply forcing a change of subject. She was asking out of genuine interest.

After he had dutifully answered her questions one by one, Kirin let out a long breath in satisfaction. “Thank you so much. That’s very helpful.”

“No problem. You’re really thorough.”

“Yes, I always learn a lot by hearing how good fighters train,” she said with a bright smile. “I’m in charge of my own training regimen now, but sometimes I’m not sure… And I can’t spar by myself.”

“Oh, why don’t you join our sessions, then? I mean, if you want to…”

“Wha—?” Kirin’s eyes went wide at the unexpected offer. “W-would it really be okay?”

“Um, well, I’ll have to ask Julis first, but it should be fine, I think.”

In his head, Ayato could already see Julis looking displeased as she scolded him—*“Don’t go around making promises so rashly!”* But surely she would understand, if he just explained the situation to her…

Kirin’s face lit up for a moment, but she quickly looked down,

disheartened. “I’m sorry… That’s so nice of you to offer, but my uncle gave me strict instructions to keep my distance from ranked fighters…especially any Page Ones.”

“Huh? Why’s that?”

“He doesn’t want me showing my skills unnecessarily to the competition.”

*Well, that is cautious of him*, Ayato thought. “Okay. Then, you can join me for my early morning workouts.”

“Morning workouts…?”

“I’m not in the Named Chart, so it shouldn’t be a problem, right?” With his lack of rank, he reasoned, Kouichirou would have no reason to complain.

“S-so, you mean, it would be…just the t-two of us?”

“Yup. Nothing to worry about there.”

Kirin looked at the ground, seemingly conflicted.

“Huh? Is something the matter?”

“N-no. Um…I’d like to take you up on your offer.” Kirin nodded shyly.

“Okay. I’ll message you later about where and when, so…”

And so they exchanged contact information.

While they went on discussing various parts of the training regimen, they arrived at the girls’ dormitory.

“Um, thank you. For going out of your way like this…”

“No problem. It was nice.”

“W-well, then, I’ll see you tomorrow.” Kirin bowed from the waist, bending almost a full ninety degrees, then trotted away into the dorm.

Watching her go, Ayato let out a small sigh.

By now, night had fully descended upon the campus, and a beautiful moon floated in the ultramarine sky. The wind seemed to have picked up a bit, judging by the murmur of rustling leaves that filled the promenade.

Within that quiet evening atmosphere, Ayato could feel a faint hidden presence.

From where, he wasn’t sure, but someone was watching him. Not hostile—definitely someone, though.

*Where could they be…?* He looked around, moving only his eyes, trying not to let on that he was searching for the observer.

There was no one on the promenade besides him. The only places where someone could hide would be behind the trees, or—

*Above me?!*

Ayato looked up with a start, and in nearly the same instant, a small shadow shook the branches above and leaped down onto him. It grabbed on and clung to his back just like something from a ghost story.

"*Augh!* …Wait. S-Saya?"

He was startled for a moment but turned just enough to see that the creature clinging to him was his current classmate and old friend.

A friend from whom he knew to expect such eccentric behavior. He sighed in relief and rebuked her in the next breath. "Don't scare people like that… Took ten years off my life."

"…Who was that?"

Completely ignoring his protests, Saya tightened her arms, which were wrapped around Ayato's neck. This, of course, resulted in strangling him.

"Guh—! Hey, Saya…! I can't breathe!"

"…Just answer me. Who was that?"

"I—I can't answer…with no air!"

"…Oh."

Finally understanding the problem, Saya let go of Ayato and hopped off his back. "Sorry. I got suspicious and I tensed up without thinking."

"I—I'll live…," Ayato managed, coughing. "But what were you doing up there anyway?"

“I was looking for you. ’S more efficient to search from a high vantage point.”

That only prompted more questions. “Looking for me? Why?” Ayato asked.

“It’s regarding the tag team partnership. I want an answer from you.”

“Oh yeah…”

So this was about the Phoenix. Apparently, Saya was serious about participating.

“Sorry, but I’m teaming up with Julis. That’s not negotiable.”

*I made a promise to her, after all.*

“…I see. All right.” With that, Saya simply backed off.

She was stubborn by nature, but once someone else was firm in communicating their position, she could readily accept it. This sort of exchange with her had been a regular occurrence, way back when.

Saya returned to the other subject. “Now—who was that?”

Was Ayato imagining the hint of wariness in her eyes?

“That was Kirin Toudou,” he replied. “She’s a middle school student. You haven’t heard of her from the school news or anything?”

“…Oh yes. The number one ranked student you dueled with yesterday.”

“That’s right.” He nodded.

But Saya frowned. “She’s in her first year of middle school…” She glared in the direction that Kirin had run off, then fixed a stare down at her own body and patted herself down—her chest in particular. “The world abounds with injustice.”

Ayato could understand what she was getting at but decided he was better off keeping his mouth shut on that subject. “Well, you know, she’s a lot like you in some ways.”

“…What ways?”

“She told me she came to this school for her father’s sake. I don’t know all the details, but that reminded me of you.”

Saya took this in quietly, neither affirming nor denying the comparison.

With her usual unexpressive manner, she mumbled to herself. “Her father…”

*

The next morning, Ayato arrived in front of the high school building five minutes ahead of the time they'd agreed on. He found Kirin already waiting for him.

"Good morning, Mr. Amagiri."

"Good morning, Miss Toudou."

Of course, Kirin was not in uniform yet, dressed instead in a simple but adorable athletic set. She wore a large pouch and her katana at her waist.

"Okay, so let's start with a run," Ayato said. "…Though, actually, we should stretch first."

"Sure!" Kirin said.

They went through stretching exercises, in part to warm up.

Ayato was glad for the chance to do stretches that required two people. Every time Kirin moved her torso, however, her chest bounced accordingly, and he had to avert his eyes. It was continually surprising to remember that she was only thirteen.

And with two-person stretches, which required bodily contact, here and there her chest ended up touching him, which was even more disconcerting.

With Claudia, he could tell she was mostly teasing, and it was easy to dismiss as just that. But with Kirin, the contact was completely innocent, which somehow made it worse—he had no idea how to deal with it at all.

"Is something wrong?" she said.

"Oh—no, nothing."

Kirin tilted her head at him blankly as she went on stretching. The sight made one expect sound effects: *boing, boing.*

One contributing factor was that her workout clothes showed her curves more clearly than her uniform did.

"Hey, Miss Toudou, which way do you usually run?" he asked.

"I leave the school, then I run around the outskirts of the island."

"Oh, you go *out*?" Ayato's running exercises consisted mainly of short-distance sprints, so this sounded like a welcome change of pace to him. "All right. Maybe I'll try it, too."

"All right. I'll lead, then," Kirin said with a bright smile.

Ayato had begun to notice it yesterday, but Kirin was a very expressive girl.

She might spend more time with her face looking downcast or sad, but when she smiled like that, he thought, it was really very charming. So cute, in fact, that it made him want to pet her head.

"Is something wrong?" she said again.

"Nope. Nothing. Please lead the way."

Ayato was starting to get accustomed to life in Asterisk, but only within the bounds of Seidoukan Academy. He knew no more about the city than what Julis had shown him, and other than that trip, he hadn't even gone for a walk off campus at all.

"Okay. I will!" Kirin suddenly seemed very enthusiastic, her eyes shining with earnest determination. "Oh, but before we start… Do you use a weight, Amagiri?"

"Weight?"

"Um…like this."

Kirin took something resembling a vest from her waist pouch and handed it to Ayato.

It looked as heavy as blocks of stone. Most ordinary people would have difficulty even lifting it.

"On the school grounds, running at our normal speed isn't a problem, but that wouldn't do off campus."

"Oh, right. I guess it's not very safe."

Even at a light dash, Genestella could easily run at the legal speed limit for automobiles. At full speed, there was no comparison. If they collided with an ordinary person at such a speed, obviously that person would suffer serious injury, or worse. And barring unusual mitigating circumstances, injuries caused by Genestella to ordinary people resulted in extremely harsh punishments—even when it was an accident.

"If we wear these, we won't go very fast," Kirin explained. "It's a good workout, too."

"Gotcha."

At home, Ayato would go running only in isolated places like the hills out back. A contrivance like this allowed for refreshingly different possibilities.

"I brought one for you, too. Would you like to use it?"

"Thanks. I'll give it a try."

He put it on and confirmed that it was as heavy as he might have thought. It would definitely be effective.

"All right. Let's go." Kirin started to run ahead, leading the way.

# CHAPTER 6
# MENACE IN THE MIST

"You seem to be spending a lot of time with Kirin Toudou."

The voice came abruptly from behind Ayato as he stood in front of the meal ticket vending machine at the Hokuto dining hall, trying to decide what to have for lunch. He turned to see a girl with splendid rose-colored hair, standing there with a sullen look on her face.

"Oh, it's you, Julis. Are you about to get lunch, too?" He was alone today, since Eishirou was low on funds and Saya was getting a lecture from Kyouko for oversleeping and being late to class. But Ayato believed food tasted better with company, so he went ahead and invited her. "Since we're both here, you want to eat together?"

"Oh—well, hmm, if you insist, I *suppose* I could…" Julis looked away shyly but nodded to accept, and it was plain from her expression that she wasn't altogether displeased.

"I think I'll have the chicken curry today." From the air-window displaying the available meals, Ayato selected the picture of curry prominently featuring chicken on the bone. Ordering via a ticket vending machine was a rarity these days, but he liked that about this dining hall. "What about you, Julis?"

"Hmm… I can't decide between the pasta set or the one that comes with dessert…" She studiously pondered the air-window with her hand to her chin, but then she suddenly looked up at Ayato to shout at him. "Wait—that's not the problem here! I want to know what you and Kirin Toudou are—"

Making a wild gesture, she accidentally touched an item on the air-window.

“Oh…”

“Huh…?”

With a *gatunk*, the vending machine dispensed a ticket printed with the words “Special Spicy Curry.”

“Oh, that’s the Hokuto dining hall’s famous dish,” Ayato said. “It’s supposed to be *super* hot—”

“It—it’s fine! That’s what I wanted anyway! I’m going to find us a table, so you go pick up our food!”

“Uh, okay…”

Spurred to urgency by her tone, Ayato gingerly went to pick up the two plates of curry and immediately noticed that one of them was devastatingly potent. It looked just like the other, but he could tell from the aroma that it was far spicier.

That aroma alone was enough to sting his eyes, so strong that it made him think twice about picking up the plate.

“Ayato, over here.”

Julis waved at him from a table by the wall.

“Here we are, Julis. But are you sure? This smells really intense.” He placed the tray in front of her and watched as a bit of uncertainty crept into her face.

“I *said* this is what I wanted! Now tell me what you’re doing with Kirin Toudou!”

“Um, well, we just started training together in the morning, that’s all.” He answered honestly, since he and Kirin were hardly doing anything unusual.

Julis seemed to relax a little.

“Oh, were you worried that I was giving away my fighting skills? Nah, it’s totally fine. We’re only doing really basic stuff, and I’m not breaking my seal. Besides, Toudou already knows a lot about my skills from our duel, so—”

“No, that’s not what I…,” Julis started, not quite satisfied with something, but then she sighed and weakly shook her head. “Never mind. If you can talk about it like that, I clearly had nothing to worry about.”

Ayato wasn’t sure what she meant, but she seemed okay with him spending time with Kirin. That was a relief. “Anyway, Julis, you haven’t taken a bite yet… Is it okay?”

“Er…”

Her plate of special spicy curry was as full as when he’d brought it. She was stirring it around with her spoon without taking

a single bite.

"If it's too hot for you, you don't have to finish it. You could order something else—"

"Idiot! I'm not going to waste food!"

He wondered if it was the influence of her friends back home that made her so reluctant to let food go to waste despite her upbringing as a princess.

With a fierce resolve, Julis brought her spoon to her mouth. She didn't make a sound, but her face turned crimson, then white as a sheet.

"Hey, Julis! You really shouldn't force yourself if you—"

"*Ngh.* I—I'm fine…! This is nothing!" she blurted, her voice shaking and her eyes full of tears.

Then she chugged her cup of water. She did not seem at all fine.

"Um, well, what if we switch?"

"What?!" Her eyes went wide in surprise.

"Mine is pretty spicy, but I bet it's easier to eat than yours. I mean, if you want to…"

Julis sat there frozen, stiff as a statue.

"Oh, I guess you wouldn't want it after I touched it with my spoon…"

"N-no! That's not it!" She ferociously shook her head. "I don't care about that! Actually—" Then she gasped at her own words and stopped herself mid-sentence. "A-anyway, I mean, I ordered it, so the responsibility to finish it is mine. I can't pass it off on you."

"That's just like you, I guess." Ayato was almost impressed at how stubborn she could be. But then he thought of a way he might convince her. "So, this might not be a big deal…but if we're going to be effective partners in battle, don't we have to be able to speak to each other honestly and not hold anything back?"

"Oh… Um, well…"

It might be something of a dirty trick to hold the Festa over her as a persuasion tactic, he thought, but maybe this would get her to think more flexibly.

For a few moments Julis anxiously looked back and forth between Ayato and her special spicy curry. Finally, she held her plate toward him with both hands, shy and faltering.

"Then…um…can I…switch plates…with you?" she asked timidly, looking up at him with watery eyes.

There was something cute about that, different from the usual

Julis, and he felt his heart begin to pound.

"Ayato?" She tilted her head at him.

He nodded hurriedly. "Oh, sure! Of course!" Then he traded his chicken curry for the special spicy curry.

"Th-thank you," Julis said, and brought her spoon to her mouth again. Was it because of the spicy bite from earlier that her face seemed a little red?

*Julis is really cute when she says how she feels…*

Of course, Julis was beautiful as her usual stubborn self, too. Maybe it was simply the departure from the norm that made it feel all the more striking.

As Ayato was lost in those thoughts, he absentmindedly threw a spoonful of the special spicy curry in his mouth—and was stunned by the sheer force of its spiciness. He barely managed to finish it himself before the lunch recess ended.

*

A bronze-skinned woman walked in a hurry, the hard *clacks* of her footsteps echoing down the long corridor.

The corridor was in Allekant Académie, in the underground block of the research building—in fact, the most high-security area of the block. This area was off-limits not only to anyone from outside the school, but also to students in the practical class, and even for those in the research class, excellent academic performance was not enough for admittance. Only researchers with a proven history of *results* were allowed in here.

It was much closer to a facility than a school building. It had a highly functional construction, with clinical white walls and floors stretching wherever one looked. There were no flowers or paintings, no decorations of any kind. This was a cold space devoid of anything that might be defined as unnecessary.

She went through a security checkpoint that scanned her school crest and biometrics, then impatiently opened a door activated by her personal access code, which had been assigned to her by the keeper of the room.

The woman, Camilla, entered with a forceful announcement: “Tenorio made their move.”

No reply came from the room, which was filled with countless air-windows large and small.

With their glow and the lights from laboratory equipment as the only illumination, it was so dim that she could barely see. But she could make out the candy wrappers littering the floor, along with animal plushies and remnants of now unrecognizable toys.

“Ernesta?” she called out dubiously, but went unanswered again.

Camilla strode to the far end of the room, carefully picking her way to avoid the debris on the floor. In a chair in front of a particularly sizable air-window, she found a girl wrapped up in a

blanket, fast asleep.

With a sigh, she yanked the blanket off the girl. “Wake up, Ernesta. It’s what you’ve been waiting for all this time.”

“Mrrow?!” Ernesta jolted awake, still wearing her eye mask with cartoon eyes drawn on. She was drooling from the corner of her mouth.

“Rise and shine, Ernesta.”

“I *wasn’t* asleep. I was just thinking with my eyes closed, see?” Ernesta pushed up her eye mask and waved her hands to prove her wakefulness.

“…Right. Then can you tell me why I’m here?”

“Hmm? Tenorio made their move, right?” she said nonchalantly, stretching at length like a cat.

“So you really were awake?”

Ernesta laughed. “My senses are as sharp as a knife even when I’m sleeping!”

*That’s quite something…but then you* were *asleep, after all.* Camilla did not point this out aloud. They didn’t have time to waste on banter. “The situation is already developing. We’ll miss our chance if we dawdle.”

There were preparations involved if they wanted to get a good seat to the show. They had legwork to do.

“Yup, yup! I know, I know!” Ernesta stifled a yawn as she pulled up a projection keyboard. She deftly entered a few commands, and the air-windows in the room flew into alignment, then disappeared, all except one.

Ernesta moved the remaining window in front of her and Camilla, then tilted her head curiously. "*Hunh?* Who's that beside Mr. Sword Fighter?"

"Prepare to be shocked. That's Seidoukan's number one ranked student."

"Oooooh. Now, that *is* something." Ernesta's eyes went round, then lit up like sparklers. "So they're going to attack knowing of it. They really must be pumped up."

"It shows how seriously they're taking this." Camilla pulled up a nearby chair and sat down.

"That, or they have a lot of confidence in their new project. It'd be a shame if Mr. Sword Fighter and his friend got their butts kicked. *Tee-hee-hee!*"

Camilla scowled at Ernesta, who spoke as if this matter had very little bearing on them.

"I wonder how much we were able to bait them. Did we manage to lure in the Great Scholar, Magnum Opus?"

"There's no way she would get involved directly. The ones working on this case are below her—up to the vice-chair of Tenorio."

Ernesta nodded knowingly at Camilla's reply. "Well, I thought they'd be careful. Oh, well. Now we can keep Tenorio under our heel for way longer than we expected."

"Yes, this is good. We don't want to drive them into too tight of a corner."

*Besides*, Camilla thought, *if that one made the excursion herself, Ayato might really lose.* Then all their scheming would have been for nothing.

"I must say…you do enjoy a good gamble," Camilla said with a wry smile.

"Whaa—?" Ernesta turned back to her with a clueless look.

"I mean that you take too many large risks."

Ernesta grinned mischievously. "It's more fun that way! I just can't help it."

The expression on her face seemed innocent enough, but Camilla also saw in it a hint of inscrutable cruelty.

*

For a brief spell in the early morning, the city of Asterisk would transform into a world of hazy white.

The difference in temperature between the lake water and the atmosphere made fog a common occurrence. It was an ephemeral sight, fated to vanish shortly after the sun rose, but its dreamlike beauty mesmerized all who were fortunate enough to witness it.

Today, however, the fog was even heavier than usual.

"Good morning, Mr. Amagiri!" Kirin emerged from the white mist in her workout clothes and bashfully bowed to him.

"Hey Miss Toudou," Ayato replied, and looked around in mild amazement. "Wow, the fog is pretty heavy today."

As always, they met in front of the Seidoukan Academy high school building.

He and Kirin had been training together in the mornings for several days now. But this was the most fog he had ever seen—and that included the mornings when he had trained alone.

"Yes, it is… Oh, but I've heard that in the winter it can be even heavier."

"Really? This is plenty heavy for me." If he moved even a little bit farther away from her, he could no longer discern her expression. "Anyway, with the fog like this, we could lose each other during our run. Maybe we should hold hands or something."

"Oh yes, I suppose…"

"Huh?"

Ayato had made the suggestion as a joke, but Kirin was taking it seriously. With her cheeks flushing, she gingerly grabbed onto Ayato's fingertips.

"S-sorry. I, um, I was just kidding…"

With a gasp, she hurriedly let go of his hand. "Wha—? Oh—um—I'm so sorry—!"

Although they had touched only briefly, Ayato could feel the faint warmth that remained on his fingers. "No, it's my fault, I shouldn't have…"

For a few moments, neither of them knew what to say.

"Um… Should we get going, then?" Ayato said at last.

"Y-yes! Let's!" Nodding her head vigorously, Kirin started to run.

The main route of their morning runs was the road that went all the way around the outer rim of Asterisk.

At this hour, the road was mostly deserted. They would occasionally pass other students out running as well, but other than that they were surrounded by stillness, the entire city still asleep.

Looking at the cityscape shrouded in the morning mist gave Ayato the feeling that he had wandered into another land. If he turned toward the lake, he could not see more than a few yards into the distance. It was like a different world lay just beyond his sight.

But Kirin's light footsteps from ahead rang in his ears, a reassuring certainty completely removed from the mystical moodiness of the fog.

As they ran easily along the lakeside path, Ayato suddenly noticed a strange presence. Someone, or something, was following them from a ways back.

Their pursuers were staying at a fixed distance, apparently adjusting their pace to match that of Ayato and Kirin.

"…Mr. Amagiri?" she whispered. She had also noticed, and slowed down slightly so they were side by side.

"I know. We're not alone." Ayato signaled to Kirin with his eyes, and they both slowed their pace dramatically.

They could sense the slight bewilderment in the presence behind them.

"Are there four of them? No, five."

"Yes…but there's something off." Kirin frowned suspiciously. "This presence—it doesn't feel like people, but…"

Just as she murmured those words, they both stopped running. This time, it was not by design. The road in front of them was closed.

"Construction? But this wasn't here yesterday…"

They hadn't noticed until the last second because of the heavy fog, but signs forbidding entry blocked off the road and the pedestrian path.

"We could just ignore the signs and run through. What do you think?" Ayato said.

"I don't think it's safe with such low visibility. And it might be a trap," Kirin replied.

The presence behind them had also stopped, still keeping their fixed distance. Their pursuers seemed to be waiting to see what they would do.

"There *is* a way around…but that feels like it'd be a trap, too."

Directly in front of the blocked road, there was one path still

available to them: On their right was a large park surrounded by a tall fence, its single entrance invitingly open.

"I wonder which one of us is the target. Do you know of anybody who'd want to come after you, Kirin?"

"Um, well, maybe a few…" She *was* ranked first, after all.

"What about you, Mr. Amagiri?"

"Yeah, I can think of someone, too."

As he said that, he was thinking (naturally) of Ernesta's face, but there was something not quite right about the idea of her being involved in this. At the moment, though, he did not have the luxury of mentally picking that apart.

"We could split up," he suggested.

"Then we would at least know which one of us they're after," Kirin added.

If both of them were being targeted, however, that would be the worst move, as it would result in unnecessarily splitting up their strength.

"Well, why don't we stick together for now."

"Okay!" Kirin sounded glad about this for some reason.

"Then the question is, which way do we…?" Ayato trailed off as he sensed a change in the presence behind them.

Perhaps running out of patience, they had begun to edge closer.

When their pursuers were less than ten yards away, Ayato understood what Kirin had said. They were not human. This presence was something else. He considered the possibility that they were dolls, like the ones he had fought before, but he could sense a small amount of prana from them.

*Then are they Genestella…? No, but—*

What emerged from the mist were creatures he had never seen before.

At first glance, their shapes were reminiscent of large felines, like tigers—but instead of fur they were covered with something more like hard scales. Their necks were long, and their vicious faces looked reptilian, with sharp fangs protruding from their mouths. The best description he could have made was that they resembled wingless dragons.

There were five of them, and they were clearly hostile toward Ayato and Kirin.

"What kind of animals are they?" Kirin wondered.

"Well, they're nothing we have where I grew up," Ayato said.

Kirin cocked her head. She had clearly never seen anything like them before, either. “But they’re kind of cute, aren’t they?”

“Yeah, sure—wait, what?”

Ayato couldn’t help but do a double take at her, and at that moment, the dragon-like things seized the chance to leap upon them.

“Whoa—!” He wasted no time in drawing his sword and activating it. The blade of light emerged to stop the sharp claws of the not-dragon just in time.

He shoved the massive beast away from him, and the not-dragon twisted in midair to land gracefully on its feet. Its movements seemed distinctly feline.

“Mr. Amagiri, are you okay?”

He turned to Kirin to see that she was handling three attacking creatures. But she had not even drawn her sword—she easily fended them off with just the scabbard.

“Huh. I guess they aren’t too tough?” Ayato ran between the front claws of the first attacker as it rushed at him again. He figured he could manage the onslaught even in his current state; it didn’t seem necessary to release his seal.

But when he lightly swung his sword to parry, it easily sliced through the beast’s front leg. He gaped in disbelief at what he saw. “What the—?!”

The severed leg crumbled and melted away like syrup—then, rather than disappearing, it turned into a translucent slime that quivered on the ground.

The beast did not seem at all disturbed by losing its leg, and not a drop of blood flowed from the wound. The slimy substance flew back to its stump, then immediately regenerated into a new leg before their eyes.

“How…?” As Ayato stood there, stunned, the one creature that had been staying in the rear opened its mouth wide.

The mana around them rushed to gather at its maw. Fire poured from the not-dragon’s mouth and swirled into a sphere.

“Oh, no way—!”

It was the same kind of ability to interact with mana that Stregas and Dantes had.

The beast shot the fireball with a low-pitched roar, and Ayato deflected it with the fuller of his sword.

It was nothing compared to the power of someone like Julis,

but he had never imagined that living things other than humans could link with mana.

"Are these the mutants Claudia was talking about…?" he thought aloud.

But if that was the case, these monsters should have been a topic of public conversation long before now. Ayato knew that Asterisk was a city far removed from common sense, but he had never heard of creatures like these roaming about.

With low growls, two of the not-dragons crept toward Ayato.

"I don't want to kill them if we don't have to, but…it doesn't look like we have much choice."

He didn't know enough about them. If he went easy on them, it could get much worse for himself and Kirin.

Ayato raised his sword and held it horizontally as he calmed his breathing. He ordered his prana, heightened it, then released his strength for just one instant—

The same instant that two of the "dragons" leaped up and lunged at him from either side.

"Amagiri Shinmei Style, First Technique: *Line of Hornets!*"

With lightning speed, Ayato circled around the creatures, then turned his wrist and extended his arm in a fierce one-handed thrust. Both skewered through the side, the creatures let out eldritch shrieks that hardly sounded as if they'd come from living things.

But their bodies melted down, just as that severed leg had. The puddles of slimy goop backed away from him with an unexpectedly nimble motion, then slowly coalesced again—and in all of ten seconds, the creatures had reformed.

Ayato was simply stupefied at this development. "Don't tell me they're actually immortal…"

In that case, what could they do?

If Julis were here, she could probably burn them all to ashes. He wasn't sure how much could be done with ordinary swordplay.

*Maybe if I used the Ser Veresta…*

However, that would mean breaking his seal entirely, and then he would have to deal with the time limit. That was not a move to make lightly.

"It looks like cutting or piercing attacks are ineffective," Kirin said anxiously. She was now standing with her back against his. The sword in her hand was fully drawn.

"This is just a guess, but maybe they're really slime-like

organisms, and their current form is something like mimicry?" Ayato suggested.

"I see…"

"If we can just get away, that might be the best option."

Ayato was confident that they could not be easily caught in a game of tag, but at the same time, running at full speed in this fog would be risky.

"May I try something?" Kirin asked, as she walked up almost casually to one of the not-dragons.

"Wha—?"

The thing made a wary, threatening growl, then flew at her the moment it was barely within her striking distance.

"I'm sorry," Kirin whispered calmly, then dodged the attack with a slight twist.

In the next instant, the not-dragon had been sliced in half. It howled in that same eerie voice, and its body melted into slime.

She slashed at the melting goo before it even fell to the ground. Her sword swung over and over, terrifically fast, slicing it smaller and smaller. One would have to describe her speed as superhuman.

Pieces of slime fell to the ground by the dozens and extended pseudopodia toward each other to remerge. But Kirin kept on slicing one chunk in the air, making smaller pieces still.

Ayato caught something different about that piece. He could see something tiny and round squirming inside it.

The sphere moved this way and that, evading her attacks, but with each stroke, there was less and less slime to move around in. Finally, when the piece of slime had been whittled down to the size of a fist, the sphere had nowhere to go.

"…It's over."

Kirin's blade flashed. The sphere was sliced in half.

At that same moment, the puddles of slime writhing on the ground abruptly stopped.

Apparently, the sphere had been controlling the slime itself.

Seeing what had taken place, the other creatures backed away, as if in fear.

"It looks as if they have some sort of core. Hopefully, this will get them to retreat," Kirin said as if nothing had happened, and sheathed her sword. Still, she seemed sad somehow.

"How could you tell that they had a core?"

"I noticed something odd about the flow of their prana. I've

always been sensitive to that kind of thing."

All Genestella had to be aware of how prana flowed through their own bodies. Seeing how prana flowed through others, however, was a different matter entirely. Gauging quantity and skill was one thing, but to be able to sense the slightest changes—that was a particularly special power.

"I feel like I just learned one of the things that makes you so strong." Smiling in amazement, Ayato picked up the remains of the halved sphere.

He couldn't tell specifically what the material was, but it was unmistakably something inorganic. Obviously man-made, then.

"So…I guess Allekant is behind this," he remarked.

"Allekant?" Kirin looked mystified.

"Well, it's a long story but— Whoa!"

From a good distance, the remaining not-dragons had begun to hurl fireballs at Ayato. In fact, all four of them were aiming only for him.

Apparently, they had determined that since Kirin was too strong, they should focus on Ayato instead. *Well, they're not wrong.*

"Hey—wait! …Augh!"

He didn't have the time to weigh his options anymore. *There's no way around it now. I have to break the seal and…*

He leaped back a good way to distance himself from the creatures and landed near the entrance of the park. Just as he was about to focus his prana, another fireball came flying.

Only this time, it wasn't aimed *at* him.

Clearly on a low trajectory, the fireball exploded at his feet with a low boom. The paving stones underneath him began to crack apart from the point of impact.

"Wha…?" Seeing that this wasn't good, he automatically tried to leap to safety—but he was too late.

When he looked up, an area of about five yards in every direction from him had fallen away to form a giant hole. That fireball couldn't possibly have carved away at the city's foundation itself—which meant the ground must have been weakened in advance.

"Mr. Amagiri!"

Kirin jumped into the hole and reached out to him.

Ayato also extended his hand to grab hers. He felt her pull him up.

Kirin had managed to get ahold of the edge of the hole with her other hand, and she hung there, holding on to him.

"Are you okay, Mr. Amagiri?"

"Yeah, you saved me just in time—"

But their relief was short-lived.

They heard an ominous cracking sound, and the piece of the edge to which Kirin clung mercilessly crumbled away.

The dark abyss swallowed them both, leaving behind only their panicked screams.

*

"Is that the end of Act One?"

Sitting in front of an air-window and looking bored, Ernesta stifled a yawn. The display showed a scene where Ayato and Kirin had just fallen into the depths of a giant hole.

"I wonder how they're gonna explain that huge hole in the ground. There'll be trouble if the city guard finds out, don't you think?"

"I hear there was construction planned there anyway. But that's not a concern for now." Camilla, seated next to Ernesta, was diligently checking the data being delivered by the probe at the scene.

"So that's the Phryganella viscous attacker, huh?" Ernesta said. "Not all that impressive for Tenorio's ace in the hole."

"That's a bit harsh. I found it very interesting."

"I guess the mana circulation control and the mimicry transition technology were pretty cool. But the rest? All standard. *Way* standard. I mean, if they can change shape, they should do something more interesting than just that lizard thing. Y'know, like a penguin or a kitty!" Ernesta reached for a plush toy of some strange creature and held it in her arms, plopping her chin on top of it.

"You're just talking about what *you'd* want to do… In any case, it appears that the protoplasm transformation–utilizing prana can take on only a prerecorded shape. And that currently, each core unit can store only one shape."

Camilla had opened an air-window of her own and was checking information leaked to her from their mole at Tenorio.

Bioenhancement was Tenorio's technological specialty. While Ernesta's assessment was not exactly glowing, Camilla thought that there were many praiseworthy aspects to it.

Still, it was nauseating to think of the process behind that technology.

"Only one type? Even *more* unimpressive. Well, I guess that's about the best Tenorio can do without the Great Scholar." Ernesta was losing what little interest she had. "Besides, those things are way too weak. What good are they even supposed to be?"

"They can't do much about that. Tenorio's not exactly developing specialized living weapons, after all. Those are just by-products."

"Well, sure, but right now my dolls are like a million billion times stronger."

*A million billion? What are you, in kindergarten?* Camilla thought.

"If we could say one thing in their defense, it's that their opponent was too strong. Seidoukan's top-ranked student achieved her rank for a reason."

"Hmm, I'll give you that. There aren't that many people in our school right now who can face someone at her level head-on."

"Yes. Many of the stronger students in the practical class graduated—including the winning tag team from the last Phoenix."

"Well, that's some of the reason why *we* get to take the lead."

The air-window switched to display a different scene.

"Ooh, is this Act Two?"

"I'm told this is the part that clique was banking on, at least."

"Oh, *is* it now! Then let's see what they've got!"

*

The first thing Ayato felt was the impact—then the cold, and a sense that he couldn't breathe.

*…Am I underwater?!*

It was dark and there were air bubbles all around him, making it hard to discern his surroundings. But it felt like he had fallen into some deep body of water.

He couldn't tell up from down, so he calmed himself and let his body go limp. He should start floating back up to the surface, but for some reason, that wasn't happening. Rather, it felt like he was

sinking deeper and deeper.

*Well, duh! I've got this weight vest on!* he realized. He frantically removed the obstacle and swam toward a faint light that had to mean *up*.

He broke the surface with a splash and drew in a massive lungful of air, finally thinking he might be safe.

At first, he'd assumed that he must have fallen into the lake, but that didn't seem to be the case now.

It was a frighteningly vast space. High above, he could see the hole where they had fallen in, but there were more than a few strata of ground in between. Even underground space was utilized for various purposes in Asterisk, and someone had gone to the trouble of digging through all that to make the hole.

It was clearly a man-made trap.

"This sure is a big cave…"

His best estimate of the distance from the surface of the water to the ceiling was sixty feet. He couldn't tell how wide it was. To his left, a wall towered over him, but on the other side, there was only the water and enormous pillars for as far as he could see.

There was almost no light—only a minimal amount of scattered rays clung to the walls and ceiling.

"Oh! Where's Toudou?!" He looked around and noticed weak splashing a short distance away. "Toudou!"

Judging from her desperate struggling, she was obviously in danger of drowning. Ayato suspected that she couldn't get her weight vest off. He swam toward her in a rush, and she grabbed on to him, her face almost in tears.

Kirin coughed and regained her voice. "Th-thank you, Mr. Amagiri! You saved me!"

"Are you okay, Miss Toudou? Let's get your weight off—" But then he saw that hers was already gone. "Huh…?"

She made a tiny embarrassed whine. "Sorry, I…c-can't swim."

"Oh…I see." This was something of a surprise to Ayato. He hadn't imagined that someone with her athletic prowess might never have learned.

Still, Genestella were human, too. Everyone had their strengths and weaknesses.

"No, I'm the one who should be sorry," he said. "I brought you into this."

Kirin had fallen in only because she was trying to save him.

“Don’t worry about me. But where are we…?” she asked once she had caught her breath, still sounding a little nasal.

“I think we’re under Asterisk.”

“Then…are we in the ballast area?” Kirin turned her gaze upward.

“Ballast area?”

“Um, so Asterisk is a megafloat structure, and they use the weight of the water for stability, I think.”

“Oh, I see.” Ayato didn’t know very much about the structure of the city, but that sounded plausible.

“So, then, there must be an entrance for maintenance…” Kirin tried to look around, then turned bright red.

“What’s wrong?”

“N-nothing! Um, it…it’s just…”

As Kirin groped for words, Ayato suddenly realized the problem.

The fact that she was holding on to him naturally put her face very close to his, so that their cheeks almost touched.

But that was above the water. Under the surface, Kirin’s ample twin peaks were pressing against Ayato’s arm. In fact, it was more accurate to say that his arm was swallowed deep in the valley between them.

“I—I—I’m sorry! I’m so sorry! If only I could swim—!”

“No, no, no! I don’t care, really—”

Still, even a Genestella did not have the stamina to tread water indefinitely while supporting the weight of two people. They needed to find a way out or at least something stable to rest against.

Just then—Ayato caught sight of a giant shadow lurking deep in the water.

“Miss Toudou…?”

“Y-yes?”

“Can you hold your breath for a bit?”

As soon as he said that, Ayato dove into the water with Kirin in his arms. He kicked with all his strength to move them as fast as he could.

An enormous *something* grazed past them and sent them tumbling underwater.

They somehow managed to hold on to each other, then resurfaced. What they had just seen defied belief.

“What—?” squeaked Kirin.

Ayato laughed helplessly. “Now, *this* is something else.”

There was nothing more they could say. From the very spot where they had been floating moments ago, a giant dragon reared its head.

Compared to this, the not-dragons that had attacked them aboveground might as well have been mice. Just the part they could see above the water seemed to be almost ten yards long. Its full length had to be well over fifteen yards. From its silhouette, it looked very much like a denizen of the prehistoric world, like a plesiosaur.

The not-dragons from before resembled lizards, but this one seemed more snakelike. Still, Ayato could make out limbs protruding from its thick body, and the sharp row of teeth and giant head reminded him of nothing other than a dragon.

And just like those not-dragons, it was staring at them with a considerable level of something akin to hostility.

“Well, I guess it makes sense,” Ayato said. “They went through the trouble of dropping us down here. They’re not just going to let us go home.”

The purpose of those not-dragons must have been to chase them here—and this giant creature was the main trap all along.

“Ayato… This dragon feels the same as the ones aboveground,” Kirin whispered. She must have sensed its flow of prana.

“So you think it’s really a slime?”

“Probably…”

“That’s not particularly good news, is it?”

If it was the same, attacking it normally with a sword would have no effect.

Either way, there wasn’t much they could do unarmed. He activated his sword Lux and, at the same time, released his seal. In the situation they were in now, he couldn’t afford to hesitate.

The magic circles that shackled him flew apart, and the prana that had been trapped within rose up. The glow faintly illuminated their dark surroundings.

Apparently reading this as aggression, the monster charged with a growl.

Even with his power released, Ayato was not swift underwater. Still, he swam in front of Kirin to protect her and met the charge head-on.

It slammed into him, pushing him through the water while

pinned to the tip of the dragon's nose. He was holding his breath and fending off the huge sharp teeth when he met one of the pillars with that same momentum.

The impact made a craterlike dent in the massive pillar, opening cracks through it in every direction.

"Ouch…"

"A-are you all right?!"

"Oh, sure. This is nothing, but the situation doesn't look too great…" He had transferred his prana to defense, so the impact did little damage to him. Still, the fact remained that they did not have much in the way of recourse.

The dragon seemed to be checking on the condition of its prey, observing them from a distance. Maybe it was unexpectedly cautious in nature.

"If—if I'm going to slow you down, please let me go!" Kirin blurted. "If you get hurt because of me, then I—I…"

She trembled in Ayato's arms, tears rolling down her face.

"Hey—hey, Miss Toudou?"

"I really am useless. No matter how good I am with a sword, I just—I hate it! I can't stand people getting hurt for my sake!" Kirin sobbed, shaking her head in frustration.

Ayato let out a long breath, then softly drew her close and petted her head. "It's okay. You don't have anything to worry about."

"But—but—!"

"That thing would be no match against you out of the water, right? And I gave you a decent fight. Couldn't you have a little more faith in me?" Ayato admonished her gently, looking straight into her eyes.

"But that's…"

"And one more thing. Don't ever talk about yourself that way. You're kind and strong… You're a wonderful girl."

"Huh—?" Kirin stared at Ayato for a few moments in surprise. Then her cheeks flushed pink, but she nodded resolutely. "Okay! I—I won't." She scrubbed at her tears and lifted her head, looking determined.

"That's good to hear." Ayato petted her head one more time, then switched weapons to the Ser Veresta. As he channeled his prana, black symbols rose up to darken the white blade. "Now what we need is something to stand on."

He lightly swung the Ser Veresta, being careful not to let the blade touch the water.

He carved a section out of the thick pillar as easily as if it were made of tofu, making just enough space for the two of them to stand. Doing damage to things that were apparently significant to the city's structure gave him some pause, but at the moment, there was no way around it.

When he lifted Kirin onto the landing first, the dragon pounced on the opportunity to rush at him from behind.

Without even turning to look, Ayato casually waved the Ser Veresta at it with one arm. Before the sharp row of teeth could find their target, they were severed from the mouth, and the head of the dragon went flying.

The head melted in midair and before long was wiggling its way through the water to retake its form.

Ayato climbed onto the landing to join Kirin. "Yup, looks like it's the same as the ones from up there," he muttered with a frown, watching it regenerate.

The dragon seemed even more cautious after that attack and circled the pillar while keeping a distance of some ten yards. It clearly wasn't stupid.

After a while, it begun to gather mana at its mouth, just as the creatures aboveground had. A giant fireball formed quickly, then launched like a missile toward Ayato and Kirin.

With a light swing of the Ser Veresta, the projectile scattered like a cloud and evaporated. This was child's play compared to Julis's power.

"This'll go on for a while, unless we figure out something else," Ayato muttered.

He could go on the offensive, but that meant that he would have to leap in and he'd get one shot to finish it off. That might work against an ordinary foe, but if this one was built like the slimes above, he had to be sure to strike at its core.

"Miss Toudou, can you read the flow of its prana?"

"Oh—yes. Sort of…"

"Can you tell where its core is?"

"That's hard… I think it's constantly moving around inside its body."

This really was a troublesome opponent.

"Well, then I don't have much choice. I'll have to try."

“Try what…?”

As Kirin looked at him questioningly, Ayato lifted the Ser Veresta high.

“Yeah. I’m not very good with this—actually, I’ve never been able to do it. But I have to take a step forward sometime.”

With those words, Ayato poured his prana into the Ser Veresta.

Meteor Arts—they were techniques that could temporarily raise the energy output of a Lux by concentrating prana into the manadite core. Prana enhanced physical abilities, so it was relatively easy to heighten one’s defenses, as Ayato had done moments ago. But the ways in which it could be used for offense were limited, as channeling prana to conventional weapons had little effect. Channeling prana could be a powerful technique in bare-handed combat, a method for which Jie Long students were well-known. Otherwise, one needed material that would react strongly to prana as the medium—which was to say, manadite.

Ayato, however, had never successfully used Meteor Arts before. His prana was so massive that the Lux would break, being unable to withstand the strain. Ideally, he would be able to adjust for it, but he had never been very good at such delicate control of his prana.

So he had given up on it, until now.

“This one should be able to handle it,” he said.

The Ser Veresta growled as if in response.

Absorbing his seemingly inexhaustible prana, the Ser Veresta changed shape little by little. The black symbols spread and the blade itself began to grow in pace with them.

“Wow…” Kirin gasped.

The Ser Veresta grew with accelerating speed, and quickly grew to over ten yards long. The blade let out a low roar, and the black symbols danced madly around it.

The dragon seemed to feel the instinct of fear and turned, about to flee—but it was too late.

With a shout, Ayato brought the enormous sword down, and the dragon’s body evaporated the moment it made contact with the blade. He kept slicing through to the part of it that was still underwater.

The water boiled away at an astounding rate, swirling madly in an explosive gust. Steam rose furiously and toyed with Ayato and Kirin’s hair like a storm. It reminded them of the fog aboveground

from earlier, but the mists faded this time, and there was not a trace of the dragon left to be found.

"Whew… Well, not bad, I guess."

Ayato had never expended that much prana in his life. The fatigue felt satisfying.

The aftereffects of breaking his seal, however, could hardly be described that way. He grunted at the sudden pain.

"Mr. Amagiri!" Kirin cried out. "Are you okay, Mr. Amagiri?!"

Magic circles appeared around him, once again shackling his power.

He fell and Kirin hurried to catch him in her arms. The indescribable softness of her embrace made him shy, but he was powerless to pull away.

*

"…So you can fight at full strength for only five minutes?"

"Yes, for now. Well, I think I could go for longer if I pushed it, but even then I probably wouldn't last ten minutes," Ayato said with a weak smile, leaning back against the place he had carved out in the pillar.

He and Kirin decided to wait there for help. Not that there were any other realistic options, since Ayato could barely move now and Kirin could not swim.

They weren't getting reception on their mobile devices, which was no help, but Ayato was sure that someone would notice that something was wrong if enough time passed. Even Eishirou would have to notice if Ayato didn't make it back from morning training. Or so he hoped.

"I guess if I use a lot of prana, that shortens the time limit. I was fighting for less than five today."

"Oh…I see…" Kirin hung her head sadly.

"Is something the matter?"

She looked up at Ayato with her face on the verge of tears. "Why do you fight if this is what it does to you, Amagiri?"

"Wha—?" The question caught him by surprise, but he had already found the answer earlier. "There's someone I want to help."

Yes. That was what he had to do now. The thing that he *wanted* to do.

“Is that Riessfeld?”

“Well…yes.”

When she saw Ayato nod in answer to the question, Kirin dropped her gaze, looking disappointed somehow.

“Th-then, is it true that you, um, you…l-like her?”

“Huh?!” Another question he hadn’t expected. This one made him fly into a panic. “N-no, that’s not why—! Um, of course I think she’s a great person, but, uh, it’s not…really…”

“Wha—? Then wh-why…?” Kirin began to press blankly, only to think better of it and suddenly stop. “No, never mind. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have asked such a weird question.”

She bowed, looking a little bit glad somehow.

“Maybe I still have…”

She murmured something under her breath. Ayato couldn’t quite hear it.

“N-no, it’s fine, I don’t care, but— *Achoo!*” As the tension dropped from their conversation, Ayato let out a splendid sneeze.

“Oh—are you all right?”

“Well, we are soaked through, so it’s pretty cold.”

“Yes. The towel also got wet— *Choo!*” Evidently, Kirin was also cold.

Probably because it was underground—or more precisely, underwater—this place was very cool despite it being the middle of summer. At this rate, they could get thoroughly sick before being found.

“We should probably dry our clothes…”

“Y-you’re right…”

They glanced at each other, then went quiet.

Ayato couldn’t get himself to suggest that they take their clothes off. Saying that might immediately brand him as a degenerate. On the other hand, simply removing his own clothes would have a rather aggressive connotation. And as someone who had trespassed into the girls’ dormitory, he couldn’t possibly…

“Uh, um…” Kirin interrupted his thoughts by tugging at his sleeve, with a face that could not possibly become any redder. “Well, it… It’s not good for us to be in wet clothes, so…”

“Huh?”

It seemed like steam might spout from her ears. Kirin looked down.

Then, after letting her gaze wander on the ground for a while,

she spoke, her voice so faint it seemed to disappear into the air. “W-would you…turn around for a bit, please?”

They decided to dry their clothes on Kirin’s katana. She propped it up across the carved-out pillar like a laundry pole, and they hung their clothes on it.

Two feet and four inches in length. It felt like a shame to treat a masterpiece of the great swordsmith Shinkai Inoue in this way, but there was nothing else to use. (The sword was called the Senbakiri, Ayato learned. It meant “to cut like a thousand paper cranes.”)

The ballast area was not only cool but humid. It would take a while for their clothes to dry. The heat from the Ser Veresta might have sped things up, but he feared that using the Orga Lux as a makeshift dryer might offend it—and in any case, having just broken his seal, he would have to wait some time before he could activate his sword again.

Ayato and Kirin sat in silence, back to back.

They could not bring themselves to undress completely, so he still wore his shorts and she wore her underwear.

Ayato could feel the pounding of a heart so loud he thought it might burst, but he couldn’t tell if it was his own or Kirin’s.

“Um…Miss Toudou?”

“Y-y-yes?!”

Ayato tried to make some sort of conversation to lighten the mood, but Kirin was rigid with tension and even her voice was stiff.

But somehow that let him relax him a little.

“About what we were saying before… Can I ask you the same question? Why you fight here?”

“M-me?” Kirin hesitated, the question catching her off guard, but then, after a moment’s reflection, she spoke evenly. “The reason I fight… I might have mentioned it before, but I’m fighting to save my father.”

“Right. Your father is a Genestella, too?”

“…Yes.”

The children of Genestella were not always Genestella, but the probability was much higher. Parents who were both Genestella were around ten times more likely to have a Genestella child than two parents who were not.

“But now, my father is incarcerated. As a criminal. And I want to save him.”

“A criminal…?”

It was true that the integrated enterprise foundations could grant any wish to the champion of the Festa, even if that wish involved bending the law—freeing a convicted criminal, for instance. And in fact, there were more than a few instances like that, Ayato had heard.

“But he didn’t do anything wrong! He was just trying to protect me!” In her outburst, Kirin began to turn around, then caught herself and quickly faced away from him again.

“Protect you? What happened?”

“Five years ago, someone tried to rob a store, when my father and I were inside. He saved me when the man tried to take me hostage. And my father—my father ended up killing the man. But he didn’t mean to.”

Kirin’s voice was heavy with frustration and regret. Ayato could hear her grit her teeth between her words.

Five years ago, she would have been eight—still just a child.

“And the man wasn’t a Genestella, was he?”

Kirin shook her head.

Everywhere in the world, Genestella were at a social disadvantage. In some cases, this meant their human rights were curtailed. This inequity was particularly marked in cases where Genestella caused harm to ordinary people. Even if it was in self-defense, the law would always treat it as excessive force. And if the other party died as a result, harsh sentences were the norm, even if the victim was the one who had committed the crime.

Some went so far as to suggest that the IEFs had deliberately engineered this inequality. After all, the system clearly worked for their profit.

“The robber didn’t seem to realize that I was a Genestella. If he had, he probably wouldn’t have chosen me as his hostage. But I had a knife pointed at me. I was so scared, I couldn’t do anything.”

Even Genestella children had tremendous strength, but without considerable training, an adult with a weapon still posed a real threat to them. It was understandable that young Kirin would have been helpless. “And then your father acted to save you,” Ayato said.

“Yes… I was already in training at the time. Thinking back on it now, it would have been easy to apprehend that man myself. But I’m spineless, I’m such a coward…” She sniffled. “So now my father is in jail. He still has decades to serve. But the one who told me how I could save him was my uncle.”

“That’s why you came here?”

“Yes. My uncle never got along with my father, and he hates Genestella. He probably resents that he wasn’t chosen as the heir of the Toudou school, even though he’s the older brother. But still, he chose to help me—and maybe it was out of his own interests, but that doesn’t bother me. I have no choice now but to depend on him.” Kirin’s voice trembled, holding back tears, but her words were clear and firm.

Still, something about what she said bothered Ayato. What was it?

“My uncle is very capable, actually. He got the IEF to keep the press from reporting the case, and he said he even arranged a different identity for my father so that the Toudou family wouldn’t take the fall.”

“Whoa…”

That *did* surprise Ayato. It sank in just how wildly the power of the IEFs surpassed that of any nation or law.

And now that he thought about it, he had never heard about the head of the Toudou-style school being arrested. Under normal circumstances, that would have been big news, considering the scale of the style’s popularity.

“He’s that good at handling me, too. He got everyone talking about my skills as soon as I came to the school. He chose my opponents, gathered information on them, and advised me on my strategy. He knows the best times for me to duel and the most efficient way for me to build up my record.” Kirin’s back shuddered. “If I just do as he says, then I don’t need to—”

Her words had begun to flow like an internal monologue, repeated over and over. Ayato flatly cut her off. “You’re wrong, Miss.”

“Wrong…?”

“Even if you know where you want to go, it isn’t by the path you chose. So it’s not going to work. Sooner or later, you’ll get stuck.”

Ayato knew that she had to find out for herself what she was

supposed to do. If she didn't get to choose how to do it, someday she would burn out. And he didn't want to see that happen to her.

"Well, I'm not really one to talk," he said sheepishly. "I only just figured it out myself."

Kirin was quiet for a while. When she spoke, it was in a low, shaky whisper. "But…I can't. I can't do this alone, I just—"

"It's okay." Ayato turned around to softly pet her head.

"Oh…"

"You're not alone. At least, I'll be here for you. If it's the path you choose, really choose for yourself, I'll help you."

"A path I choose…," Kirin whispered as if to confirm it to herself. Then she stared earnestly at Ayato.

He thought he saw something sparkle deep in her eyes, but it was barely for a moment. He could have imagined it.

"Oh—but when we fight, that's a different story, okay? It'd be patronizing to go easy on you… Well, not like I really have that option against you, anyway." Ayato held her gaze with a shy smile.

"You're strange, Mr. Amagiri," Kirin said, wiping away her tears, and her shoulders shook with laughter.

"Julis tells me that, too… All the time, actually." Ayato scratched his head.

"But you're really cool," Kirin whispered faintly.

Her voice was too soft for him to hear. But… "Wait—um— *Ack!* Miss Toudou?!"

"Huh? Oh— *Eep!*" she squealed.

They finally realized then that they were facing each other.

Having caught an eyeful of Kirin's precociously shapely body, Ayato turned away again in a panic. "S-s-sorry!"

"N-no, that's… *I—I'm* sorry!"

As they stuttered through their flustered apologies, their backs to each other, they heard voices calling from above.

Help was here at last. Ayato let out a sigh of relief.

Then he heard Kirin's hesitant voice from behind him. "Um… You did it just now, too, but you—you pet my head a lot, Mr. Amagiri."

"Huh? Oh, I'm sorry. Does it bother you?"

It probably wasn't something that many people would do to a teenage girl, he thought.

But Kirin shook her head. "No, my father used to do that."

She sounded happy somehow.

# CHAPTER 7
# DETERMINATION AND DUEL

Kouichirou Toudou had been in a foul mood since the day began.

It was all because of the emergency report from Seidoukan Academy telling him that his niece had gone missing.

By the time he arrived at the scene in a rush, Kirin had already been found safe. Though he breathed a huge sigh of relief, he was fuming at the time he'd had to take to deal with such an incident.

The Seventh Division Educational Research Office was at the Galaxy corporate headquarters in Otsu, Japan's present capital city. Kouichirou's own operations, however, were based in the Asterisk branch office—an arrangement that, needless to say, made it easier to manage Kirin.

Kouichirou summoned Kirin to the back of the school building as usual and spoke to her with unconcealed disdain. "Honestly. Don't make me worry like that."

"I'm sorry, Uncle." Kirin obediently bowed her head.

"Hmph. Never mind. Now, about your next duel…"

"Before we get to that, Uncle, may I ask a question?"

"What?"

"You just said you were worried about me—but was it about Kirin Toudou, your niece? Or about Kirin Toudou, the tool?"

Kouichirou was taken aback for a moment, but he quickly recovered, staring down at her with a cruel smile twisting his lips. "What a stupid question to ask this late in the game. You know perfectly well—what I need from you is your strength, nothing else."

"I see…" Kirin looked down sadly.

Kouichirou could not bear to lose her. But that was because of Kirin's value as a tool to advance his career, and only that. He had not a shred of affection for her; on the contrary, he even found her repulsive.

He still bore a grudge against her father, Seijirou, for succeeding to the head of the Toudou-style school instead of himself, the elder brother. His birthright was taken from him just because his brother happened to be born with special powers. He was not about to forgive Seijirou for that.

Kouichirou had devoted himself to the Toudou style from an early age. With his years of hard work and perfected skills, he should have been more than worthy of the succession. He understood, of course, that the Toudou style of today had many Genestella students and that corresponding strength was required of instructors.

But he was simply unable to accept the very existence of Genestella.

*Those are not people. They're just monsters.*

Why should he lose what was rightfully his because of *them*?

And so Kouichirou had severed ties with his parents and taken a job affiliated with Asterisk.

He found satisfaction in being paid to make a spectacle of those monsters devouring one another. Ironically, Kouichirou had a talent for discerning the relative strengths of Genestella through various data points. And since his skills in that area were respected, his career had made steady advances.

And one day, by chance, he acquired the finest tool he might hope for—Kirin. That was the only time he had ever had cause to thank his younger brother for anything.

Among the Supreme Executive Committee of Galaxy, the Department of Integrated Entertainment Operations took the most interest. If he used Kirin effectively, Kouichirou thought, he could show off his skills to the upper echelons of the company.

He had already submitted a plan to that effect, and in fact, it was progressing smoothly. Now was the time to build a reputation, so he had her duel many well-known students. Later, however, he planned for her to duel less and less. Her rank itself had to maintain its own dignity.

His ultimate goal was the Lindvolus, coming up in two years. With her strength, Kirin would be invincible, as long as he chose

her opponents wisely. If she were to win the Lindvolus undefeated, Kirin would receive the highest evaluation, alongside his own management skills.

They would need a special strategy against the Witch of Solitary Venom, but they had two years to come up with it. There was plenty of time. If need be, she could wield an Orga Lux. Of course, since he had advertised her prowess as the top-ranked student who was neither a Strega nor an Orga Lux wielder, they would have to wait some time to do so…

Kouichirou paused in his ruminations and his expression darkened.

"By the way, I hear you were with the Ser Veresta user—what was his name? Ayato Amagiri?—when you were attacked." He clicked his tongue, remembering that annoying brat. "I caught wind of a rumor that he got into an altercation with Allekant not long ago. It stands to reason that the incident today was related to that. You stay away from him. I don't want you getting involved in any more trouble."

Access to the official details was above his pay grade, but he was smart enough to know that there was something behind the technological cooperation agreement between Seidoukan and Allekant. And that boy was involved somehow.

"I'm afraid I must refuse," Kirin said firmly.

"What was that?" Kouichirou doubted his ears.

Kirin had rebelled against him several times before. But never before had she stared him so directly in the eye while doing it.

"All right. I'll hear you out." Kouichirou glared at her, keeping his irritation in check.

"Ayato Amagiri has taught me something important. And I think I have many more things to learn from him."

"Things to learn from him?" Kouichirou snickered, then let out an exasperated sigh. "Enough nonsense. All you have to do is what I tell you. You don't need to think about anything else."

"No, I—"

Kouichirou did not let Kirin finish, striking her cheek with the back of his hand.

He did not hold back his strength. There was no need to. But Kirin stared back at him, unflinching, standing her ground.

He raised his hand to hit her again. But instead of following through, when faced with the strength of the willpower in her eyes,

Kouichirou found himself taking a step back in awe.

He immediately recovered, however, snorting in disgust to cover his display of weakness. “That’s hilarious. You want to disobey me? And what will you do then? You want to fight your way to the top *without* my help?”

“Yes, that’s my intention,” she replied promptly.

Kouichirou burst into laughter. “Do you have any idea how stupid you sound? You really believe you can do that? Listen to me. You only made it to the top rank with *my* management. Yes, you’re strong, I won’t deny that. But don’t take Asterisk so lightly. Even if you could do it alone, how many years would it be before you could make your wish come true?”

As he ranted on, Kouichirou regained his composure.

*Right. This spineless, dull-witted niece of mine can’t do anything without my help. She might be acting tough now, but she’s just a child, through and through. If I threaten her a bit, she’ll snap like a twig.*

“Don’t you want to save your father Seijirou as quickly as you can? Then be a good girl and obey me. I can lead you to become grand champion of the Festa in three—no, two years. Could you do that alone?”

“No, I don’t think I could,” Kirin said, dropping her head slightly.

Kouichirou nodded in satisfaction. “You see? You understand that yourself. So—”

“But I don’t think I could do it your way, either.” Kirin raised her gaze resolutely and again stared straight at Kouichirou, as if she might pierce his eyes with hers.

“What was that?”

“To use your words, I don’t think I’m the only one taking Asterisk lightly, Uncle. This is not a place where someone who can’t even move forward with his own strength can hope to find victory. I realize that now.”

“You little brat! What do you know—?!” Kouichirou’s voice shook with rage. “I’ve seen hundreds of students here, since before you were born. You think you know everything, when you’ve been here for just a few months?!”

“…There are things one can learn only by experiencing them for one’s self.”

At her reply, something snapped inside of Kouichirou.

He raised his fist and brought it down with all his strength. But

this time—

“I’m sorry, Uncle.” Kirin stopped his hand before it could reach her. “I’m grateful for your help. I mean that. But I’ve decided to fight my own way. Because if I don’t…I know that someday I’ll regret it.”

With that, Kirin released Kouichirou’s hand, turned her back to him, and walked away.

Kouichirou stood in stunned silence as he watched her go, but then frantically called after her. “W-wait! What are you going to do on your own?!”

Kirin stopped and turned to face him. “Well, to start,” she said with a thin smile, “I think I’d like to have a duel.”

“A duel?”

“Yes. With an opponent of my own choosing…and by my own will.”

*

The next week, in Seidoukan Academy’s largest all-purpose arena, students filled every last seat.

Unlike the training room that Ayato and Julis had been using, the stage here was surrounded by a proper defensive barrier. Barriers that could withstand Lux attacks required very bulky equipment and expended enormous amounts of energy, and Seidoukan Academy had only three such facilities including this one.

It was usually reserved for official matches, but now, two people stood facing each other in the center of the stage.

“This was a rather forward request. Thank you for accepting, Mr. Amagiri.” Kirin bowed in her usual polite manner.

The expression on her face seemed more at ease somehow.

“Sure, it’s no problem… But why a duel? And why with me?” Ayato, in contrast, wore a strained smile.

“I thought it was absolutely necessary for me to take my first true step forward in this city.”

“Your first true step?”

“Yes.”

Ayato exhaled and shrugged his shoulders. “Okay. But as I told you before, if we’re going to do this, I won’t hold back… Well, it’s

not like I did before, either."

"I wouldn't have it any other way," Kirin said with a faint smile, and readied to draw the Senbakiri.

Ayato backed away a few paces and activated his Lux.

"You're not using that Orga Lux?" Kirin said in surprise.

"I can't keep up with your speed using the Ser Veresta." The sword-type Lux that Ayato held was less than half the size of his Orga Lux. "I'd never hear the end of it from Julis if I lost the same way twice. I have to try something different."

"Something different… That's exciting." Kirin drew the Senbakiri in one smooth motion. The blade of the katana shone under the stadium lights with a sleek gleam.

"Well, should we get started?" Ayato asked. "I don't really care for showy stages like this, but now that all these people are here, I'd feel bad if we made them wait."

Kirin laughed softly. "I feel the same way."

In the arena's VIP seats, Julis and Ayato's friends all sat together.

"You didn't need to set up the big stage for this…" Julis sullenly side-eyed Claudia, who was seated next to her.

"Oh, I thought it was only natural for such an anticipated match. Miss Toudou is our top-ranked fighter, after all, and Ayato gave her a good fight. Who wouldn't want to see the rematch?"

"But still…," Julis muttered, then looked fretfully at Ayato.

She didn't think he would have agreed to the duel if he had no confidence in his chances of winning. Even so, she had a mountain of things to worry about—whether Ayato could keep his time limit a secret or the possibility that he might suffer a serious injury that would affect them later…

"…Don't worry so much, Riessfeld," Saya said from the row behind her.

"You can *say* that, Sasamiya, but he's up against the school's number one. It's impossible not to worry."

"He'll be okay. No problem," Saya declared. She apparently had a good deal of faith in Ayato.

Of course, Julis believed in Ayato as her battle partner, but she understood that Saya knew him much better from the time they had spent together. Julis found that irritating, for some reason. Her face pinched up in frustration.

"But looking back at their previous match, Kirin Toudou's skill

with the sword is substantial," she said. "Did you watch it?"

"Mm-hmm. I watched it."

The first duel between Ayato and Kirin had been widely viewed on the Net. There was probably not a single student interested in the rankings who had yet to watch it.

"Toudou is strong. Possibly stronger than Ayato, if we're talking just about swordplay," Saya went on, expressionless as usual.

"Well, then—!"

"But it's fine. Ayato has fought a much stronger opponent many times."

"What do you mean? Who?" Julis twisted around to face Saya.

"Haru—his big sister," she replied tersely.

Julis made a small growl. "His sister was that strong?"

Saya nodded once.

"Well, he seems to have some plan," Lester cut in from his seat next to Claudia. "He's not going to lose that easily."

"What do you mean, Lester? Do you know something that I don't?"

"Maybe. He asked me to get him a Lux. I let him borrow one of my spares."

"A Lux? Why didn't he just go to the Matériel Department?"

"That would take time with adjustments and all. If you need one quick, it's easier to just ask someone you know."

"Huh. So he asked you, too." The surprised voice came from the row in front of Julis. It was Eishirou, who had also been in a prime viewing spot for the first duel.

And just as before, he had set himself up in the front row, camera in hand.

"You mean he asked you, too, Yabuki?"

"Uh-huh. Ooh—it looks like they're getting started." As soon as Eishirou said that, everyone turned their gazes forward to the stage.

In the center of the arena, an explosion of prana burst from Ayato's body. All at once, the crowd went wild.

*

"Here I come!"

Kirin made the first move. She closed the distance between them in a single leap and in a flash brought her katana down

diagonally.

Ayato, who had been holding his sword low, swung high to deflect. It was a sharp strike coming at him, but he had more raw strength. He was confident that he would have the advantage if they were to lock swords.

Knocked upward, Kirin's katana immediately drew an arc in midair to strike down with a backhand. Her speed was nothing short of extraordinary. Ayato blocked by holding his sword sideways, but in the next moment the point of the Senbakiri was lunging at his right forearm. He pulled back his arm to dodge, and Kirin took the opening to step forward with her right leg and slice in a rising arc.

It was a relentless serial attack—and Ayato was forced to fight completely on the defensive.

He was not at such a great disadvantage in speed. In terms of how fast they could strike, the two fighters were almost equal. But Kirin's attacks connected from one blow to the next with a terrifying fluidity. She allowed no space for a counterattack.

She could never fight this way if she waited to see how her opponent responded to each attack. The opponent's line of sight, distance, breathing—she instantaneously used every factor to direct the fight her way. She eliminated every option the opponent might have except for the one that was most favorable for her…

*"Ngh!"* He groaned. Ayato knew all that, and he still could not escape it.

To leap outside her engineering would be to leap into certain death.

*Even so…the only thing to do is try!*

As Kirin rushed at him with superhuman speed, Ayato left himself open to the blow.

The pain was searing, like a red-hot poker held against his side, but he ignored it and slashed at her chest. But she twisted, easily dodging the attack.

Marveling anew at her reflexes, Ayato took a large leap back to reestablish the distance between them, and let out a deep breath.

The wound to his side was relatively shallow, since he had concentrated his prana there. If he'd failed to do so, it would have resulted in an injury serious enough to decide the match.

Kirin, for her part, regarded Ayato with genuine admiration. "You're amazing, Mr. Amagiri. It was like cutting at a thick sheet of

steel."

"If nothing else, I've got a lot of prana to use," he quipped.

But that was not a defense he could use indefinitely. However much prana he had at his disposal, it would have little effect unless he concentrated it with the exact same timing as the attack. That would become more and more difficult as the opponent became more accustomed to the maneuver. And besides, he would run out of prana in short order if he applied it to defense constantly.

"And that was the first time someone escaped my Linked Cranes," she said.

"Oh, so that's the famous Linked Cranes. I'm honored to experience it firsthand."

The Toudou style was said to be "like folding a paper crane," in particular because of the precision of the combination attacks used to corner one's opponent. The esoteric master technique, the Linked Cranes, was the embodiment of this style.

Both the Amagiri Shinmei style and the Toudou style allowed for matches with other schools, so Ayato had been able to watch several up close. The Toudou style had students all over the world, and here in Asterisk there had to be at least a few who were confident in their swordplay.

But he had never seen a Toudou fighter who had reached the level of wielding that master technique—except for the girl in front of him now.

"Nesting, Flowering Tachibana, Wings in Flight, Waves on the Blue Sea—there are forty-nine combination techniques in the Toudou style. Linked Cranes is the technique that achieves the perfect attack combination by incorporating all of them." Kirin lowered her stance slightly and held her sword by her side, ready to strike. "The Linked Cranes have no end—I will finish you with the next one!"

A wave of force swirled out from her like a maelstrom and slammed into Ayato.

She knew of his time limit. If she moved to prolong the fight, she would have far greater odds of winning.

She knew that—but she showed no signs of doing so.

*She really is a good, honest girl…*

She was younger than Ayato, but her skill with a sword was as good—or better. He wondered how hard she had trained to reach this level and how fierce was the resolve behind each swing of her

sword.

Even as he was deeply moved by her character, Ayato held his sword vertically in front of him and focused his will.

The rationale behind Kirin's technique—the Toudou-style technique—was excellent. A style specializing in one-on-one combat matched up favorably against the Amagiri Shinmei style, which was designed for survival on the battlefield.

And yet…

"Then I'll meet you with all the might of the Amagiri Shinmei style." Ayato heightened his prana.

*

From her sideways stance, Kirin leaped into Ayato's range in a single breath and slashed straight across with the Senbakiri. He held up his sword to defend, but she turned her wrists and swung down from above.

Kirin had already resumed the Linked Cranes. All she had to do now was to keep slicing away until her opponent's defense wore down.

Because it required the user to go on an incessant offensive, the Linked Cranes drained stamina rapidly. But with the intensity of her training, Kirin was able to continue executing the technique for nearly an hour. And until Ayato had done it moments ago, no one had been able to escape her Linked Cranes.

*I'm going to end it this time—!*

Before, she had been able to strike only at his side, but this time she meant to go for the school crest. Even Ayato would not be able to protect *that* with his prana.

Of course, it was significantly harder to aim for the tiny target that the school crest made, but as time went on, the Linked Cranes also wore down the opponent's mental stamina. Sooner or later Ayato would leave an opening in his guard.

*And when he does…*

Kirin brought her katana down to clash fiercely with Ayato's sword Lux—and with a flash of light the sword exploded into pieces.

"What—?!" Startled, Kirin shielded her face from the blast and repositioned herself with a backstep. The explosion was small and

lacked force.

Just before it, Kirin had noticed that Ayato's prana was concentrated in his sword, but…

*Did he try to execute a Meteor Arts move and fail…?*

Meteor Arts required thorough calibration of the Lux and the ability to delicately manipulate one's prana. If a substantial amount of prana was poured into the manadite core all at once and the weapon could not withstand the concentration, it would explode.

But it was hard to believe that Ayato would make such a mistake at that moment.

*Then was it on purpose to escape the Linked Cranes…?*

That may have been an effective option, but to Kirin it seemed like an act of desperation. Without a weapon, he had no way to defend against her strikes.

All this went through her mind in the blink of an eye. She repositioned the Senbakiri.

But then—

"Amagiri Shinmei Style Spear Technique: *Ninth-Cloud Hornet!*"

Three sharp spear strikes emerged from the smoke of the explosion to rush almost simultaneously at Kirin.

"A triple strike…! But—a *spear* technique?!"

Caught off guard, Kirin deflected the attacks to the side and righted herself to look ahead. Ayato stood there enshrouded in smoke, holding a spear-type Lux in both hands.

"Did that surprise you? Well, it's a loan from a friend, so it is a little big for me," Ayato said with a faint smile, then immediately thrust out with the spear again.

Kirin recovered quickly, ordered her breathing, and stepped forward to meet the strike with her sword.

As Ayato had said, the spear was quite large for his stature. The shaft was well over six feet long, and the gleaming spearhead was big enough to cover his face. But he wielded the spear with a practiced, natural hand and used its length effectively to keep her at a distance.

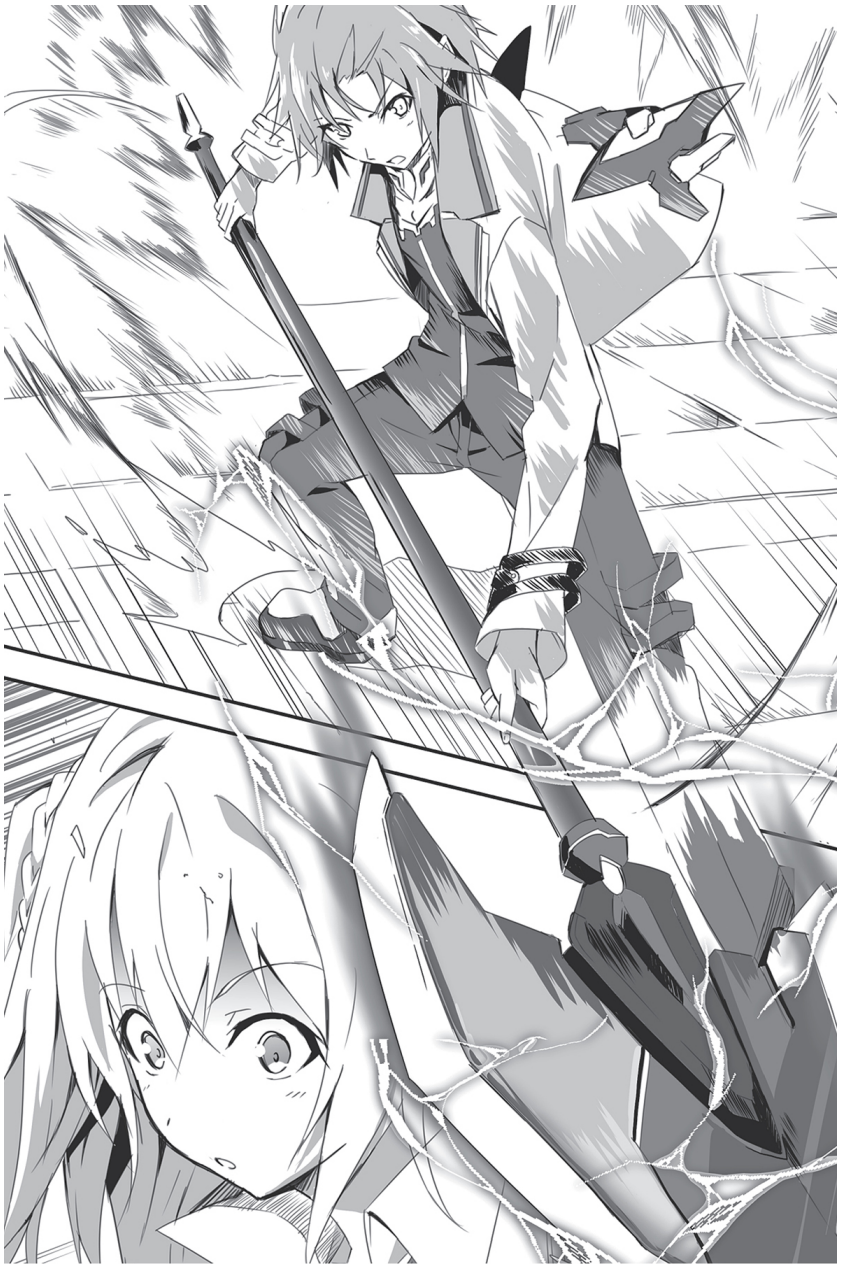
"Yes, that was a surprise," Kirin said. "But—a trick is just a trick!"

She calmly gauged its striking distance; then just when he had extended his reach to its fullest, she deflected the shaft upward.

He may have had considerable skill with the spear, but it was undeniably a step below his swordplay.

Kirin slid closer in front of him, depriving him of the advantage of a long weapon. But just as she was about to slice upward at his school crest, she was met with another shock.

Ayato abruptly let go of the spear and drew a third Lux from a holster inside his jacket. He activated the new weapon—this time a short-sword Lux.



“You can’t possibly—!” she exclaimed.

“Two tricks work better than one!” Holding it backhand, he parried Kirin’s attack and used the momentum to spin his body one full revolution. “Amagiri Shinmei Style Kodachi Technique: *Warrior’s Reaping!*”

*“Ngh!”* Acting mainly on reflex, she turned her katana and blocked the attack head-on. Ayato’s dagger sent sparks flying and she felt the heavy impact in her arms.

She was at a disadvantage in sheer strength. Knowing that, Kirin decided on an all-or-nothing gambit.

She relaxed her arms just for an instant, letting Ayato’s kodachi press closer. The blade of light came slicing at her school crest, but there was too much blunt force behind his attack. Twisting herself, she barely evaded the strike, then swept down on the blade from above.

The short-sword fell from Ayato’s hand. He did not have time to draw another weapon.

Just as Kirin became certain of victory, Ayato extended his arms to grab her by the collar.

“Amagiri Shinmei Style Grappling Technique—”

“What—?”

Kirin felt herself being lifted into the air. *Up* and *down* changed places.

*“Graven Ring of Purification!”*

In the next instant, a shock ran through her back and chest, knocking the wind out of her. Unable to get air into her lungs, she winced and finally realized that she had been thrown to the ground.

Through the tears blurring her vision, she could see that Ayato’s elbow was pinning her chest—bearing down on her school crest. So there was the shock she’d felt to her chest.

*He brought his elbow down at the same time he slammed me into the ground…*

It was a vicious move, but then, many ancient techniques were.

“Are you okay, Kirin?” Ayato peered anxiously into her face, and she responded with a weak smile.

For a reason she could not name, she felt clean, free.

“You got me. The spear and the knife were just decoys, weren’t they?”

The grappling technique had been his strategy all along. He had let Kirin get near him on purpose.

*All this time, I was the one being directed…*

Kirin softly closed her eyes. She heard a crack from the school crest on her chest.

"I concede. You've beaten me."

As she spoke, the crest rang out with a mechanical alarm.

*"End of duel! Winner: Ayato Amagiri!"*

The crowd was silent for a moment—until it erupted into a cheer so loud that it seemed the arena might shatter.

*

"I can't believe you really beat her. I'm shocked, to be honest."

They were in the waiting room of the arena. Julis offered a drink to Ayato, who was sitting limply on a chair.

"I surprised myself, too," he said with a weak laugh, then received the beverage to drink it a little at a time.

He ached all over from breaking the seal, but this time it was not so bad as to prevent him from moving. The battle had gone for less than five minutes, even though it had felt like much longer.

After the conclusion of the duel, they'd fought off the swarm of students from various journalism clubs to escape into this waiting room and now had a chance to catch their breath. The journalists were still milling outside the door, but they did not witness Ayato closing the seal again.

Still, he had broken the seal in plain sight a few times now, and there had to be students who were beginning to suspect something. The secret wouldn't remain a secret for much longer.

"Well, now you're the new number one," Julis said. "You really are something." She looked confounded and impressed and somewhat proud all at the same time.

"Thanks. Maybe I was able to redeem myself a little?"

"Redeem? What are you talking about?"

"Remember? I messed up the last time, when I dueled without talking to you first," Ayato said. "And then you told me that if I made it to Page One, we'd have an advantage in the tournament bracket for the Phoenix."

Julis's eyes widened. "Don't tell me *that's* the reason you agreed to this duel?"

"Um, well, not the *only* reason…"

She smiled tenderly at him and ruffled his hair. "What *am* I going to do with you…?"

Ayato's heart skipped a beat. Once in a while—like now—Julis showed a great deal of sweetness in her face.

"Ahem." That was Saya, interrupting with a theatrical cough. "Congrats. You looked really good out there. That's my Ayato." She hugged his arm.

"Thanks, Saya."

There were just the three of them in the room. Claudia had received a message on her mobile and left her seat, and did not return for the rest of the match.

"I'm not getting any cozier with you than I have to," Lester had said, quickly vacating the premises.

Eishirou had also hurried out as soon as the match was decided, mentioning that he had to prepare an extra edition of his publication. (Though he made sure to get Ayato to promise him an exclusive interview before leaving.)

Sometime Ayato would have to thank those two for letting him borrow their Luxes…

"But I never knew you had so much skill with weapons other than a sword. Why didn't you say anything?" Julis asked, leaning in and forcefully peeling Saya from his arm.

"Well, I didn't really mean to keep anything from you. It's just that I can only sort of use those weapons. I didn't think it was worth mentioning."

This time, Saya shoved Julis away. "In the Amagiri Shinmei style, students move on to other weapons after mastering the sword. Ayato learned from watching."

"That's right. When we were kids, Saya and I would sneak around to watch my sister train—hey, what are you two doing, anyway?" Ayato stared in confusion as Julis and Saya went on shoving each other. Then he noticed a bit of commotion from outside.

"Ayato? May I come in?" a familiar voice said, followed by a knock on the door.

"Is that you, Claudia? Come on in."

"Sorry to bother you." Just as he'd thought, it was Claudia who

opened the door with a soft laugh.

And she had someone with her.

"Oh, Miss Toudou, too?"

"Um, excuse me…" Kirin was standing demurely next to Claudia, looking uncertain.

"I was on my way here and I saw her surrounded by the press," Claudia explained. "She seemed to be having a hard time, so I invited her to come with me."

"Th-thank you, Miss President!" Kirin bowed politely to her.

"No, not at all. You have some business with him, don't you?"

"Oh—yes." Prodded by Claudia, Kirin faced Ayato.

"Business? What is it, Miss Toudou?" he said.

Julis and Saya also looked expectantly at her.

Kirin flinched for a moment as everyone's gazes focused upon her, but she took a breath and spoke in what was for her a loud voice: "Um… C-could I please join your training sessions?"

"Huh?" The assembled faces went blank at the unexpected request.

"Um, well, Amagiri invited me earlier… And I had to decline because of my circumstances. But now…" Kirin floundered, her face going bright red.

"Ayato, what is this? You never said anything to me." Julis glared at him sharply.

He rushed to explain, "Well, I mean, wouldn't we have a lot more options if someone with her skills joined us?"

"I *suppose* so, but—"

"Not a problem. Bring it on." Saya beckoned with both hands.

"Why do you get to answer?!" Julis shouted. "As a matter of fact, you keep showing up every day, and I don't remember giving you permission!"

"You worry about the little things too much, Riessfeld. Go with the flow. That's how the world works. Just deal with it."

"Go with *your* flow, you mean, you dim-witted little tyrant!"

Ayato glanced sidelong at the two girls restarting their fight, then shrugged. "Are you really okay training with them?" he asked Kirin.

"Y-yes! Of course I am!" The girl nodded several times in determination.

"All right, then." Just as he began to hold out his hand for her to shake, there was another commotion outside the door.

“Kirin! I know you’re in here! You come out right this second, Kirin! Damn it, open this door!”

Along with the terrific bellowing, they heard a racket against the door that seemed closer to punching than knocking.

“Oh, dear. That sounds like Mr. Toudou.” Claudia, who had been standing by the door, lowered her eyebrows and touched her cheek in consternation. Then she turned to Ayato with a look that said “*What shall we do about this?*”

But this was not for Ayato to decide alone. He looked questioningly at Kirin, who nodded bravely even as she bit down on her lip.

“Okay, then. Claudia?”

“Understood.”

As soon as Claudia unlocked the door, Kouichirou stormed into the room like a bull seeing red.

“Kirin, I can’t believe what a fool you are! You had the nerve to duel without my permission, and *then* you were clumsy enough to lose?! My plan is ruined because of you!” He roared so loudly that the room seemed to vibrate. “*Now* do you see?! You need my help! Now come with me! Damn it all to hell! We have to start all over!”

He reached to grab Kirin’s arm, but she easily brushed away his hand.

“I’m sorry, Uncle.” Those were her only words as she stared back at him.

There was a tangle of emotions in her eyes, but Kouichirou in his rage could not sense any of them. “Shut up! Shut up, shut up, shut up! You just *do as I tell you*!”

Purple with fury, he raised his hand.

But before he could bring it down, his body froze.

Ayato was standing between Kouichirou and his niece, glaring up at him. “You’re only embarrassing yourself,” he said coolly. “Please leave.”

“Wh-what did you say to me? You brat…,” Kouichirou tried to shout, but his voice shriveled away mid-sentence.

Ayato’s gaze was like a bared sword, and in it lurked a primeval ferocity that sent a chill down Kouichirou’s spine. The man shuddered with instinctive fear and gingerly took a step back, going pale.

“Your niece took a step forward with her own power. You have no right to interfere.”

“Mr. Amagiri…” His name spilled quietly from Kirin’s lips.

“I see. He’s even more despicable than the rumors,” Julis said from behind Ayato, her arms crossed, glaring at Kouichirou with contempt.

“…Disgusting,” Saya said, activating her Lux.

“Wh-what are you doing? You realize that I’m not a Genestella? If you do anything to me…,” Kouichirou pleaded in a trembling voice, no longer trying to hide his fear. Then, suddenly seizing on something, he looked at Kirin. “Is this really what you want, Kirin?! I’m the one who covered up your father’s crime! If you won’t do as I say, I’ll reveal everything! Do you know what would happen to you and the Toudou style if—”

“My, you have such interesting things to say,” interrupted Claudia, who had been quietly observing the scene unfold.

“Y-you! You’re Enfield’s—” Kouichirou seemed to notice her presence for the first time, and his eyes went wide.

“I have no comment about your relationship with your niece. However, the Kirin Toudou brand you seem to believe you created —*that* does not belong to you alone.” Claudia appeared to be smiling gracefully, but not a hint of it reached her eyes. “That is the property of Seidoukan Academy and, by association, our integrated enterprise foundation. If you mean to besmirch it for personal reasons—I’m afraid I can’t allow that.”

Kouichirou grunted and groaned without forming words, his mouth moving like a fish out of water.

“I suspect that my mother would come to the same conclusion. What do you think?”

“I—I—”

“From the very start, your plan was predicated on leading Miss Toudou to become the Festa champion, *undefeated*. There’s no escaping the fact that it’s now fallen through. I suggest you leave your niece be and worry about yourself instead.”

That was the finishing blow. Kouichirou’s shoulders slumped. He unsteadily turned around and plodded toward the door.

“U-uncle!” Kirin called out from behind him.

Kouichirou paused, but did not turn around.

“I’m grateful to you. I mean that. Thank you for everything you did for me!” Kirin—as she always did, to everyone, with true courtesy and sincerity—bowed to him.

He made no reply. Nor did he look back at her before he quietly

left the room.

"Uncle…" Kirin stared disconsolately at the floor. Ayato gently placed his hand on her head.

A soft sound left her. As he petted her hair, she looked up at him with a tearful smile.

"I'm looking forward to training with you, Miss Toudou."

"Me, too. Thank you again." She nodded, scrubbing the tears from her eyes.

"Ugh… I guess there's nothing for it," Julis mumbled.

"Everything works out for the best," Saya declared.

"That is good to see." Claudia laughed softly.

An air of refreshed relief filled the room.

But Kirin looked anxiously side to side, then called to Ayato, barely above a whisper, "Um, Mr. Amagiri?"

"Hmm? What is it?"

"Well, I…I have one—no, two favors to ask you. May I?" Her voice was tiny, and she turned crimson to the tips of her ears.

"Favors…?"

"Y-yes. I'd really like to, um, to call you by your first name…" She was scarcely audible now.

"What, that's all? Of course, I don't mind. And? What's the second one?"

"Okay, um, then…Mr. A-Ayato?"

"Uh-huh?"

She faced downward but cast her eyes up at him, terribly shy and yet determined. "Could you also…call me by my first name?"

That surprised him a little. Still, he had no reason to refuse.

Ayato nodded at her with a smile.

"Sure, I will…Kirin."

# EPILOGUE

"Damn it! Are you kidding me?!"

"It didn't work at *all*?"

In a special arena in the underground block of Allekant's research institute, one young man held a sword-type Lux in either hand, and the other held a Lux assault rifle in his. Both boys stared straight ahead in panicked disbelief.

A cloud of dust rose steadily at the end of their gaze.

The Luxes these two young men held were the newest models designed by Ferrovius, known for high performance. And the young men themselves were seasoned fighters in the practical class, both listed among the Named Chart of Allekant Académie.

They were a tag team who had been among the top finishers at the previous season's Phoenix. From the looks on their faces, neither could believe the sight before his eyes.

Or perhaps it was more accurate to say that they did not *want* to believe.

A figure wavered within the cloud, and a pair of lights glowed like the eyes of something uncanny lurking in the dark night.

The terrified shrieks of the two young men ripped through the arena.

Without bothering to watch the end of the feed, Ernesta closed the air-window and turned. The sound and video abruptly stopped, leaving only two women sitting quietly in a dimly lit laboratory.

"So, that's about what I have now. What do you think, Camilla? I still need to make some fine adjustments, but not bad, right?" Ernesta said, spinning around in her chair with a gloating smile.

"May I speak frankly?"

"Go for it!"

"I've never found you more frightening than I do right now."

Camilla seemed to wring the words from her dry mouth—then she grinned.

"Eee-hee-hee-hee! That might be the highest compliment I've ever received!" Ernesta pretended to act bashful, but her eyes glittered with pride.

"If I can ask one thing—don't treat my Ferrovius fighters too harshly. It's not easy to recruit such competent practical class students, you know."

"Don't worry, they'll be fine! I said to go easy on them." Ernesta cackled without a shred of guilt.

"I have to admit, though, winning the Phoenix doesn't seem so unrealistic now."

"Well, duh. That was my goal all along. And it looks like Tenorio might be able to take care of our one cause for concern."

As always, other than the one that Ernesta had just closed, there were many air-windows of all sizes open in the lab. Ernesta pulled one of them close to her. It showed Ayato with the Ser Veresta in hand, cleaving through a giant dragon.

"Mm-hmm, that was really fantastic. Oooh, I just love it!" She laughed mirthfully and, nodding, enlarged the window. Aside from the image, the screen displayed several numbers and plots—the valuable data relayed by the probe.

"Tenorio failed to beat him, and now their hands will be tied. And you got the necessary data without dirtying your own hands. Talk about killing two birds with one stone."

"Nah, all I did was place my bet and win," Ernesta said, as if this was only to be expected. "And life is just a series of bets, so if you want something, the only way to get it is to go on a winning streak."

"Is that your guiding principle?" Camilla asked.

"Hmm, more like a philosophy, I guess?" Ernesta reached for yet another air-window.

This one showed a video of the duel between Ayato and Kirin in the arena, recorded by a Seidoukan student and uploaded to the public Net.

"Well, it would be awesome if I could've gotten some data from this, too. But I guess there's nothing for it. We can't exactly send probes into another school," she rambled and swiped the window closed.

"Ladies and gentlemen of Seidoukan and Allekant! Thank you

so much for all of your kind assistance!" Now Ernesta stood on top of her chair and took a theatrical bow. "And now, it's time for the main attraction. I do hope you stick around until the end."

With her head still bowed low, she wore a dauntless grin on her face.

Bemused as ever, Camilla nonetheless showered her friend with unreserved applause.

*

"…By the way, Toudou."

"Oh! What is it, Sasamiya?"

It was after school in the training room. Ayato, Julis, Saya, and Kirin had just gone through their first session together.

Just as Kirin had finished changing out of her workout clothes, Saya had abruptly called out to her.

"I heard you were fighting for your father. Is that true?"

"Y-yes. That's right…," Kirin replied nervously.

Arms crossed, Saya nodded a few times. "That's noble of you. Very noble."

"Wha…?"

"Actually, I'm the same. I'm fighting for my father, too."

"Oh, you are?" That surprised Kirin.

Saya leaned in close and said with her usual stoic expression, "I have a proposition for you."

"…A-a proposition?"

Paying no mind to the uncertainty in the way Kirin cocked her head, Saya pressed on. "Do you want to team up with me?"

# AFTERWORD

Hi there. It's Yuu Miyazaki.

With the support from all you readers out there, I'm putting out the second volume of *The Asterisk War*. Thank you so very much.

As you already know from just having read it, the second volume brought in lots of new characters. A new heroine, the student council presidents of the other schools, and new faces from Allekant. Some of them made only introductory appearances, but I do think the story became a lot livelier very quickly.

At first, the plan was to have a plot that focused in on the new heroine, Kirin. But I'm still in the process of setting the big stage for the whole epic, so I had to push the story forward as much as possible, too. I don't want to take away from the charm of the heroines, but at the same time, I don't want the story to stagnate, either. I'm hoping to strike the right balance, so please bear with me.

Once again, okiura's illustrations were fantastic—better than fantastic. I'm especially impressed that he depicted Kirin so adorably, even more like a cute little animal than I (as the author) imagined. He's taken on not only the design of the characters but also props and uniforms, the new Luxes, really everything. I'm so thankful to him.

A manga adaptation of *The Asterisk War* will be serialized in *Monthly Comic Alive*. The head artist Ningen will portray the world of Asterisk with a stylish design a little different from okiura's. I hope you're looking forward to it.

Finally, last but not least, I'd like to thank everyone who helped me with this volume.

My chief editor, Mr. Iwaasa—thank you for everything that you do. I always find your advice incredibly helpful. I'd also like to thank Shimizu and the rest of the editorial staff. And of course, my biggest thanks of all go to all you readers out there.

Here's hoping I see you again for the next volume!

*Yuu Miyazaki*
*January 2013*

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